

A Lecture on Mr. Potato Head

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Dear Professor McBride,

I am sorry it has taken me so long to answer your inquiry regarding the failure of our search to fill the Carnegie Wells Chair of the Humanities and, more specifically, the reasons why Professor Raymond Willis was not appointed to fill the Carnegie Wells Chair. I must say it is an unusual inquiry. I am accustomed to being asked to evaluate the work of scholars being considered for various positions across the country and even abroad. That, of course, is one of the privileges of success in our profession and one of its duties. But in every one of those instances my reply has been based upon my knowledge of their publications and public performances or upon those personal interactions that stem from mutual intellectual interests. In this case, however, you are asking me to base my evaluation upon the particulars of a search at my own institution, for which the candidate has every expectation of confidentiality.

Under normal circumstances I would not consider responding to such a request. It is evident, though, from the rumors to which you alluded in your letter, and from other sources available to me, that information about

Professor Willis's candidacy has already been disseminated far beyond the borders of our campus, information that is bound to be partial and distorted. It is this fact which gives me the motive and the license to be frank in answering your letter. From the first I recognized that your inquiry left me only two options—either to refuse the question or to answer it fully. After considerable, and not tranquil, deliberation, I have decided upon the latter course, though not without continuing unease. I regret having to speak of a fellow scholar in a way that may hurt his public standing and future opportunities. I believe, however, that the truth will serve him better than what the wings of scandal may bear, so I have decided to proceed, trusting in the seriousness of your pledge of confidentiality. I do believe that your renowned institution deserves to be fully informed about those it is considering for a distinguished and lucrative position before it makes a such an important appointment.

The vacancy of the Carnegie Wells chair, long occupied by Professor Horace Cartwright, was advertised in September of 1986, and by the October 15 deadline we had received applications from twenty-nine superb candidates, all of whom were chaired full professors at major universities or, in one case, at a distinguished small college. The search committee, which, given the interdisciplinary nature of the position, contained representatives of four different departments, was composed of Professors Mildred Fink (Philosophy), Thomas Halloran (English), Randolph Peck (History), and

myself (Comparative Literature) as chair. The array of talent before us was truly impressive and included names that would have augmented the luster of any faculty.

The process by which the committee winnowed the candidates from the original twenty-nine was deceptively easy and, it can be said with retrospect, a bringer of false hope. Professor Raymond Willis so outglistened his rivals that we invited him to campus straightaway, expecting that our task could be hastened to a quick and congratulatory end. Though still in his forties, Raymond Willis had been a star in the field of literary study for almost two decades. His wunderkind debut, The Eye of the Houka: A Reading of Baudelaire, gained broad recognition for its quirky and minute attention to Baudelaire's poems, and its sequel, Outlasting the Dreambird: Boredom in the Long Nineteenth Century, won the 1972 Christian Gauss Prize for its unexpected way of connecting the relentless culture of capitalism with stillness, inactivity, and drowsiness. In 1975 the collection of essays Not Turning Up cast a startling light upon Modernism through the lens of bankruptcy and failure, and in 1980 Willis pioneered a new literary-critical genre—part confession, part satire, part therapy, and part critique—with his massive tour de force, Dust-Collecting Among My Dreams. Since that trend-setting volume, Willis has been working on another magnum opus which, as with earlier work, he refuses to discuss in advance of publication.

During the phone conversation in which I invited him to campus he promised that his talk would suggest the new direction his research has taken.

Professor Willis looked to the committee like an ideal occupant of the Carnegie Wells chair, which should be held by a scholar of literature who has strong interests in philosophy, history, and psychology. We did not, of course, expect to find a candidate as suitable as the late, irreplaceable Horace Cartwright, for whom the chair was originally designed, but Willis promised to be the kind of scholar who could build intellectual bridges across disciplinary boundaries. His early work has a pronounced psychological bent, and all of it aims at historical contextualization, but with a running commentary on philosophical themes. As so many observers have noted, Willis, like, I might add, Horace Cartwright before him, seems actually to possess that easy omniscience to which most scholars compulsively pretend.

On Tuesday November 9, Professor Willis arrived on campus for a two-day visit. He was met at the airport by my graduate student Rebecca Magnusen, who told me afterwards that, amid a pleasant discussion centering on her dissertation topic (Beckett and Jules Verne), Willis confessed to her that he had never wanted anything so much as he wanted the Carnegie Wells Chair. In a sense I was glad to hear this, but I was also a little nonplussed that such an experienced scholar would be so candid with a student and so little concerned with his bargaining position. When Rebecca left Willis at his hotel, he took her slightly off guard by kissing her hand

instead of shaking it. (Most normal observers, I should mention, would consider Rebecca an exceptionally attractive young woman, with transpiercing blue eyes.) She came away from the encounter wondering if Willis has a European background. (He does not, having been born in Narragansett, Rhode Island.)

Rebecca also mentioned to me that on the way to his hotel Professor Willis was approached by a panhandler, a well-known denizen of the local environment known as “the Tight-Rope Walker” on account of the peculiar, almost-falling-down wobble with which he makes his way down the street. Without a moment’s hesitation Willis took out a fifty-dollar bill from his wallet and gave it to the man, saying “Here you are, my friend, have a picture of General U. S. Grant.” The poor man was stunned by this generosity and put his arms around Willis, an embrace from which, strange to say, the well-dressed scholar did not shrink. Rebecca asked him if he always gave away money and he replied, “The man looked like he needed a hand.”

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll get drunk on it?” she asked him.

“Drink is a source of consolation,” he told her, “and it is also a source of impetus.” An interesting remark in the light of subsequent events.

Our initial interview with Professor Willis was straightforward enough, and the search committee's dinner with the candidate at a local restaurant started pleasantly. According to his announced principles, Willis did not

refuse the decanter, and the committee followed suit, producing an unusually convivial atmosphere. Willis is a genial raconteur. During his Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford he claims to have launched an initiative to turn Shrove Tuesday football (also known as "mob football") from an annual carnival day festivity in Derbyshire into a regular league sport, a necessarily quixotic idea given that "mob football" apparently involves thousands of disorderly participants and is played over the terrain and waters of an entire town with the goal posts three miles apart. It was difficult for the committee to tell whether Willis's attempt to turn this medieval frolic into a regular sport was serious or whether it was a mere pretext for the humorous stories Willis tells about it.

Despite the festive conversation, or perhaps because of it, the dinner did not end on a friendly note. Toward the end of the evening more serious matters were broached, and at one point our philosopher, Professor Fink, pointed out to Professor Willis that one of his remarks about an issue raised by Wittgenstein did not follow from its apparent premise. Professor Willis failed to take this with the grace one would expect from a scholar of his position and experience. "My arguments do not follow, Mildred," he said, turning to face her directly, "they lead."

"Where do they lead?" she asked him, ill-advisedly I must admit.

"They lead me," he replied, "to a place I am sure you will not want to follow." And without another word he left us and returned to his hotel.

This uncomfortable incident might in itself have been enough to discourage the committee from further consideration of Professor Willis's candidacy, but it is also quite possible we would have been content to discount it as a symptom of the undoubted excess of wine imbibed both by Professor Willis and, it must be admitted, by Professor Fink, whom I escorted home. Such a dialectical contretemps might even be attributed to the differences in argumentative decorum between philosophers, who can be said to quibble for a living, and other humanists, who quibble only as a last resort. It will soon become clear, however, that the events of the next day made these considerations somewhat, though not entirely, moot.

Professor Willis spoke at noon in Emerson 100, a large lecture hall crowded with graduate students and faculty from all of the departments involved. There being four of these, it was the best attended lecture of its kind that I have seen, and Professor Willis was obviously delighted with the number of attentive faces, mostly young ones, looking up at him. During my introduction, I am told, he was already engaging with the audience, lifting his eyebrows in mock appreciation as I numbered his accomplishments. To my surprise, the lecture started off slow and flat, and for a few minutes Professor Willis actually seemed nervous, but as he warmed to his subject, he became quite animated, reinforcing his points with squeezing gestures of the right hand. I do not have the text of his remarks. In fact, I believe he spoke more or less extemporaneously. Following the method of Thucydides,

however, I will try to convey the speech's contents and delivery according to my memory and sense of the occasion.

“For years,” he began, “I have been resisting the fashionable postmodernist claim that some radical change in the nature of capitalist culture has occurred such that the all-encompassing media simulacrum which enfolds us in its opiate arms has actually eclipsed our access not only to Nature but to Reality itself. Here is the line of thinking which protected me from adopting this conclusion. The postmodernists make an argument from the nature of art to the nature of reality. They claim that now the most aesthetically potent works of art are the ones that no longer try to represent reality but instead represent the representations of reality. The representation of meta-reality, we might say, is now more powerful than the representation of reality. From this fact, if it is a fact, they conclude that reality is out of reach. Because artists cannot depict reality powerfully, it has disappeared from our view! The flaws in this argument are glaring and evident.” Willis reinforced this point with a vigorous squeeze, as if he were holding some small animal captive inside his fist and putting it deservedly to death.

“Let us say,” he continued, “that you and I have the same experience at the same time in the same place and that we both sit down to write about it. I finish mine and send it off to be published—it's just the sort of thing I would do. You, on the other hand, put yours in a drawer. Now mine becomes

famous. Everyone has read it and knows it by heart. Yours is still in a drawer. No one will publish it because if they did it would be derivative of mine. It would be based upon a text rather than an experience. It would have no aesthetic power. It would be meta, a copy of a copy. Yet in the first place your experience was as real as mine, and for all I know your description might be better, more informative, than mine. It is closer to the reality of what happened. Yet its chance to be aesthetically interesting is over. By preceding it into print I have banished it to the meta dimension. The moral is: you can't judge access to reality by aesthetic power. They're just two different things. The fact that you can't think of anything new or interesting to say about New Jersey doesn't mean you can't find Princeton if they offer you a chair."

"My friends," Willis continued, "that's what I thought for many years," and here he stopped and eyed the room from one side to the other. "That's what I thought until I went into a toy store and saw my old friend Mr. Potato Head. And that has changed my mind about so many things." A couple of people in the audience chuckled at this but Professor Willis did not appear to notice.

"Let us recall the details of the theory of postmodernism," he continued seriously, "as put forth most famously by the Marxist critic Thomas P. Arnauld. It's essentially a theory about language, about the sign. The premodern world, Arnauld tells us, was a world composed entirely of

symbols and signs. It was a magical world in which fantasy and reality were one. A child, as I imagine him in the Renaissance described by Arnould, a peasant child who did not have a doll or a puppet to play with in the winter, would look into the potato bin and find an anthropomorphic potato, a spud with 'eyes' that gave it a homely resemblance to the human countenance. Like a lonely God, the child would make a creature in his own image. He would recognize himself in its countenance and project upon it his fantasies of human companionship. We remember these children, the first humanists and Philosophers of As-If, with a certain sweet sadness, and we wonder if their homely joys and destiny obscure were not preferable to ours. They lived in a world suited to the human mind, a world created by the mind as a house in which to live, and not only to live but to love, to eat and sleep in, to die in peacefully and without regret.

"Then, the story goes, with the beginning of Enlightenment capitalism, there came a departure, a rigorous separation of signifier and signified. The two parts of the sign are distinct, even though inseparable. They line up with and discipline the world of the referent beyond them. They impose the bourgeois order. The literary expression of this condition is the realistic novel. In it, the imagination takes control of the Real. It imposes a human form. Under this regime and for the first time, Mr. Potato Head, the child's harmless playmate, becomes a commodity in the shape of those apparently innocent little packages with wooden eyes, noses, and other features that

our grandparents bought for their children, tiny implements of humanization to be pressed into a potato and compose its face—to be inserted, we might say, into the penetrable body of the tenderly personable vegetable. This is the realist Potato Head of the middle class—the solid spud of a referent world marked by the sign of human self-imposition. We have begun to turn the world into ourselves in a newly literal sense, the better so that it, or, you might rather say, the better so that we, can be bought and sold.” Here Willis paused significantly before reaching his crescendo.

“Then capitalism grows, erupts, surges, inflates. It transforms the whole world in its image. It spreads the bacillus of humanity. Everything becomes a human commodity. The sign becomes detached from the referent and essentially replaces it. This is what we call Modernism, with its eccentric profusion of styles working over, inscribing, and transforming everything around us. It was the Modernist Potato Head that I learned to love as a child. Entirely made of plastic—a plastic potato body with accessories stored inside like the promise of interior subjectivity, eyes and ears and mouth, Groucho-Marxian nose and thick glasses, the latter giving me perhaps my first cue towards scholarly ambition. A modern object pregnant with the glamour of style, a creature absolutely of its own kind, never associated, to my knowledge, with any mythic, not to say Oedipal, object, nor any edible or vegetable article.

“Finally, Arnauld argues, impossible to envision, the forces of Capital so intensify that the two parts of the Sign, signifier and signified, described by Saussure as being inseparable like the two sides of one piece of paper, come violently apart, leaving us with a world divested both of meaning and of reference, a perfect wilderness of mirrors without monkeys. [I have been unable to make sense of Professor Willis's image here, if I remember it correctly.] This is ‘postmodernism’, a regime of representation divested of even a distant tribute to the substrate of the Real. Reality and Nature, in this account, have actually disappeared, and all that is left for us is an almost biblical attendance on the fate to which this unfathomable God or machine will deliver us in time.

“Such is the theory, the appeal of which has always baffled me, and what has baffled me even more is the utopian enthusiasm with which some people, Arnauld included, could greet this prospect of Capitalism completing itself by taking us who knows where, the commodification of innocence and nature signifying the final and total conquest of the Real by culture and industry. I did not believe in the Reality of postmodernism, of the reality of the disappearance of the Real. I did not believe in capital letters at all. Not, that is to say, my friends, until it was forced upon me unawares only a few weeks ago when I happened to be shopping for my nephew in a toy store and I spotted a box embellished with the name of this favorite old childhood friend, Mr. Potato Head, and picked it up, only to be stunned by the image

before me. For Mr. Potato Head, I must tell you, though he bore the same friendly features of my youth, was no longer in potato form. He was merely a sort of blue doughboy in plastic, vaguely square, his face a mockery of the once recognizable personality which has now obviously been separated from its history and erased forever—utterly detached, in fact, from History itself and occluded permanently from the horizon of the world. For the first time I recognized that the Postmodern moment had indeed arrived, and I felt the irresistible importunity of capital letters. Mr. Potato-Head was no longer a potato at all. He had become, instead, a hateful kind of monstrosity, a non-thing-in-itself, an absolute, and terrifying, grinning absence.”

Professor Willis faltered at the end of this sentence and he even looked a bit teary-eyed. There was a very long pause and I thought he might be losing his train of thought or even that he might be unable to continue, but it was at this moment that the unimaginable sprung upon us in its pure and arresting contingency. In one of the front rows, far to the right of the podium, a young man, not visible to me at the outset until his momentum carried him to the ground, burst suddenly out into loud, high-pitched, uncontrollable laughter. At first he tried to stifle the impulse, but it was just too much for him; he quickly lost hold of himself, giving in repeatedly to frantic shrieks of hilarious mirth. Each of these shrieks began with a new attempt at containment, only to be further released into helpless uproar, the convulsions of a helpless body inexplicably tied to an incredulous mind facing

an unbearably ridiculous thought. Every peal of laughter seemed to build on the previous one, reaching in just a few seconds what even I have to say was a remarkably enjoyable crescendo of mirth. (If you are familiar with my own recent scholarship you may be interested to know that it was at this moment I finally understood what is happening on every page of Rabelais, and what his great seventeenth-century translator, Thomas Urquhart [pronounced Ur'-ket] had all these year been trying to teach me.) At first the laughter of the rest of the audience seemed to be directed not primarily at Willis's words but at the remarkable outburst it produced, first in the young man and then spreading to the people around him, but after the first couple of sallies the audience somehow coalesced as a group with the same motivating insight, the absurdity of the incongruously mawkish postmodern Potato Head occluded by Capital, and at that point the young man's convulsions became even more irresistibly contagious. Waves of laughter swept the crowded room. One man at the front slid out of his chair onto the floor so he could laugh more freely, and a tall woman in a green parka sitting in the middle was so carried away with the moment and let out such a comically high-fluting cackle that not even the most sober listeners could keep from joining in. People shook so hard they brushed away tears. It was remarkable that no one had a heart attack, though I was later told that one older member of the psychology department suffered back spasms later that day and spent the night in the Health Center.

You can imagine the distress this wild development caused me even as I struggled to suppress my own harmonic tremors of mirth. Professor Willis himself was slow to react. His first impulse, touching in its way, was to reach out sympathetically to the young man who had started the wave, as if there was something wrong with him, but as soon as he realized—and to his credit he did very quickly realize it—that he himself was the cause of the laughter, and that the laughter was general, perhaps even universal, he responded by shrinking behind the lectern, which only provoked additional mirth. At first some of the audience thought this was a performance. But then Willis actually slumped to the floor behind the lectern. I got up and waved my arms for silence, announcing, in as matter-of-fact a tone as I could manage, that the lecture was over. The mirth caved in like a balloon. Willis was virtually insensible. Professor Halloran and I had to guide him out of the room.

I was later informed that the laughing man was a graduate student in his fourteenth year at the university attempting to complete a dissertation on Kierkegaard and Tarkovsky, and that seven years had passed since he had submitted a page of it. In retrospect, knowledge of this fact has allowed me to reach a much more layered interpretation of his laughter than was possible on a first impression. I can hear in it now a kind of almost cosmic protest against what I may describe as the absurdity of academic existence—for those of us, of course, who are not suited to it. Or perhaps

the absurdity of academic language was behind it, or even language itself. As I mentioned, the student did his best to stifle his reaction. It was certainly not a deliberate or a mocking gesture. It was truly beyond his control.

(On a side note, I am happy to report that this moment of transgression apparently proved cathartic for the young man, almost like electroshock therapy, for since the episode he has had a remarkable burst of productivity and, with the help of a special fellowship provided by the Dean of Arts and Sciences, he has with enviable dispatch completed his long-envisioned work. I am also happy to say on behalf of my institution that he was not subjected to any form of discipline or loss of privileges on account of this truly aleatory event.)

You may think the episode I have recounted suffices to explain why Professor Willis was not offered the chair for which he was being considered, and indeed the search committee did meet as scheduled on the day following the lecture and decided to invite two additional candidates to campus. But while we were invested with the authority to remove Willis from contention, we were unwilling to do so without soliciting reactions from our colleagues. Also, given the unusual circumstances, especially the provocative nature of the audience's reaction to the lecture, the dean was anxious that we carry the process forward with due deliberation. It would be remiss of me

in any case not to convey to you the considerable range of reactions Willis's lecture evoked.

Among the committee, the first comment was made by Professor Fink, who said that we could establish empirically beyond any doubt that the lecture fit into the category of the laughable since it had occasioned universal laughter, and that laughability in a candidate's talk was in itself sufficient for disqualification. In response to this, none of us could think of anyone in the room, including ourselves, who had not laughed at least for a short period of time. Professor Halloran, however, raised the point that the laughter had been instigated by one person and that the rest of the audience might have been laughing in response to that stimulus rather than to the lecture itself. Further, he argued that that stimulus might have been an idiosyncratic reaction that would not have been shared by anyone else in the room had it not been so volubly and contagiously, in fact brilliantly, articulated. Finally, in Professor Halloran's opinion it was not surprising that Professor Willis was unable to retain his composure in face of such a general onslaught. Other members of the committee, however, agreed with Fink that the content was indeed laughable and that a single laughing stimulus, however contagiously administered, would not have been able to produce the uproar that ensued. Furthermore, the fact that one person broke the usual convention of civility forbidding laughter in such situations most likely

had the effect of prematurely liberating a response that many members of the audience would have otherwise shared in private after the lecture.

Other colleagues sympathetic to Professor Willis noted that, even though the lecture was demonstrably laughable and therefore at least on the face of it unworthy of a candidate for the Carnegie-Wells Chair, the precise meaning and tenor of the laughter were unclear, nor was it self-evident that everyone in the room was laughing for the same reason or in response to the same conception of the situation. Could anybody say, for instance, precisely what the graduate student was actually laughing about and what readings of his laughter incited other members of the audience to make their contributions to the din? In other words, could the laughter be considered univocal in its meaning? Wasn't to construe it in this way to give license to the Rousseauvian notion of a general will, with all of its totalitarian associations, or to an atavistically naturalizing conception of the relationship between signifier and signified? Others dismissed this concern on the grounds that laughter does indeed have a univocal and transcultural meaning even though, or rather because, it is a bodily reaction, and that it is almost unique in that way, making it a peculiarly unimpeachable form of testimony. Professor Fink was of this opinion. "Laughter has no complexity," she said. "It's logical form is absolutely unambiguous." Another member of the committee offered the opinion that "Laughter is to the body what Descartes' cogito is to the mind."

In general it can be said that though Professor Willis had few outright defenders, few could agree as to the grounds on which his candidacy was lacking. There were those who would have rejected him merely on account of his participation in “mob football,” and the details of his post-prandial contretemps with Professor Fink were variously rehearsed, with differing reactions, some favorable to Willis and some unfavorable. Some faculty stressed that Willis's lecture did little more than confirm Arnauld's theory of postmodernism on the grounds of personal experience, with the implication that the committee should invite Arnauld to apply instead of Willis. In response to this, however, others insisted that such personal testimony was the only truly valuable and valid form of persuasion. Some found the sentimentality of Willis' attachment to the icon or “fetish” of the Potato Head to be objectionable and, indeed, embarrassing—the phrase “pseudo-Heideggerian nostalgia” has stayed with me—but others considered the therapeutic display to be a sign of professional courage and sincerity. One of my Comparative Literature colleagues was particularly incensed by what seemed to be a pun on the words “Oedipal” and “edible,” which he heard as a disclaimer of unconscious and “perverse” sexual motives that could also be read as an inverted confession. Another colleague viewed the entire performance as a deliberate, and very brave, confession of “perverse sexuality,” with the Oedipal edibility of the Potato Head constituting an obvious and daring sexual admission. This colleague found the collective

reaction of the audience to be an unconscious symptom of complicity (she had not been present at the lecture) and insisted that if Willis was not to be hired (and she did not believe he should be) then all of the faculty who were present should resign.

A surprising amount of attention was given to the episode of Professor Willis's generosity to the panhandler, which some members of the faculty took as a symptom either of feeble-mindedness or of criminal recklessness. More charitable observers viewed this as a show of solidarity with the oppressed, but the majority saw it as a specifically oppressive status-gesture, a kind of "gift-attack" or "potlatch," though it was noted in reply that Willis's gesture was prompted by an explicit request for funds. This episode of "open-handedness" or "giving a hand" on Willis's part was connected in some faculty minds with the hand-kissing episode as well as with his memorable hand-gestures, suggesting an unconscious trend of "manual counter-hysteria" (a term new to me), and Willis's use of the word "friends" with regard to the audience and the pan-handler also betokened in some minds his sinister, seductive intentions. Given the depth of this discussion and the insights it produced, it was even suggested that the Tight-Rope Walker's intervention into the search had been sufficiently valuable that he should be recruited for similar performances in the future.

On the whole, what one might call the "close readings" of Willis's behavior were not favorable to his candidacy. The strongest note on the

other side came, perhaps inevitably, from the longer view provided by an older, soon-to-be-retired member of the faculty, who stated that Willis should be appointed simply because he had given the most entertaining performance in the history of the university and produced the most stimulating aftermath.

About the rest of Professor Willis's visit there is little to be said. Rebecca Magnusen performed the service of escorting him back to his hotel; she reported to me afterwards that he remained virtually speechless, refusing additional assistance and indicating that he would attend neither the dinner scheduled for that evening in his honor nor participate in future events. I called his room a couple of hours later and learned that he had already checked out. There were no further overtures on either side, and when the search had finally and, I am sorry to say, unsuccessfully concluded, I wrote to him in due course announcing the result. In light of my knowledge that the chair had been the pinnacle of Willis's hopes, I feared that an episode like the one I have described might have had a calamitous effect, but in the year and a half since Professor Willis's was among us his public visibility has only increased. I can also report, with rather mixed feelings, that his visit was not entirely unprofitable to him, for only last month I learned that Ms. Magnusen is abandoning the program here to become Professor Willis's wife.

I trust you will find this reply not only adequate but exhaustive. I will make no attempt to interpret it for you. All that is left for me to do is to wish you the best of luck in finding an occupant worthy of your own chair and of your efforts to fill it.

With cordial regards,

Cameron Kennings Davis
The Morton and Mabel Wilson
Chair of Comparative Literature