

MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION POLITICIZED

From Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy* (U of Pennsylvania 1986):

In December 1968, at the convention in New York of the eighty-five-year-old Modern Language Association (MLA), the normally polite and conservatively orchestrated annual meeting of its thousands of professors turned into something closer to havoc and revolution.... Just as their students were demanding contemporary relevance in the classrooms, these young instructors now voiced similar dissatisfaction with their own elders... Tempers were heated by phrases on posters erected in the lobby of Hotel Americana over the objections of hotel guards:

WE DEMAND AN END TO AMERICA'S WAR ON VIETNAM
WE DEMAND AN END TO PROFESSIONAL IRRELEVANCE
JOIN US IN BUILDING A HUMANE PROFESSION IN A HUMANE NATION

A few of the more insistent poster defenders were arrested when police arrived. At a stormy business meeting of the association on 29 December, insurgent members assembled a slim majority to pass four resolutions heavily charged with political commitments... (xvi)

The next year, the business meeting was taken up with further radical issues, including the rights of women in the profession. (xvii)... Professors...have introduced into the curriculum trivial literature courses barren of professional "standards of achievement"... The result has usually been a loss of professional self-esteem with no compensating gain in popularity and respect for the humanities and American literature. (xx) What seems a renewed assault on the integrity and usefulness of humanistic learning has generally reduced the morale of professors, old and young, in all literature fields at the time of this writing. Many of my older colleagues plan to retire early... Many professors have no one but themselves and their abdication from serious professionalism to blame for their sagging morale. In dread today lest they seem to America's youth stodgy and irrelevant by teaching their discipline with a conscious pride in its historical tradition, they have stampeded en masse, entire departments at a time, to satisfy the trends and tastes, the whims and "evaluations" of the inexperienced young. (xix-xx)