The University and the Community: Partners for the Future

Occasional Paper No. 3

By Harold G. Coward
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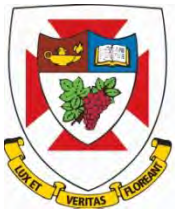

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG

FOR INFORMATION:

The Institute of Urban Studies
The University of Winnipeg
599 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg
phone: 204.982.1140
fax: 204.943.4695
general email: ius@uwinnipeg.ca

Mailing Address:
The Institute of Urban Studies
The University of Winnipeg
515 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9

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The Institute of Urban Studies is an independent research arm of the University of Winnipeg. Since 1969, the IUS has been both an academic and an applied research centre, committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan manner. The Institute examines inner city, environmental, Aboriginal and community development issues. In addition to its ongoing involvement in research, IUS brings in visiting scholars, hosts workshops, seminars and conferences, and acts in partnership with other organizations in the community to effect positive change.

THE UNIVERSITY AND THE COMMUNITY:
PARTNERS FOR THE FUTURE

The Bonnycastle Lecture 1983

University of Winnipeg

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by

Harold G. Coward
Director
The Calgary Institute for the Humanities

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I am a professor in a university. To most of my friends, who work in the community, that means I do not live or work in "the real world." Rather I live in an "ivory tower" of remote intellectual activity or narrow specialization--a place peopled by brilliant theoritians whose heads are so much in the clouds that they forget to tie their shoe laces or are liable to walk into busses while crossing the street. At least that is how many people in the work-a-day world view those of us in the university. Looking from the other side, from within the university out to the city, another, equally bad caricature exists. Many in the university are convinced that people in the community are so caught up with their business, professional or trade activity that they never stop to think, read or study. It is almost inconceivable to many in the university that knowledge could occur off-campus in the midst of the hustle and bustle of daily life. From having worked first in the community and more recently in the university, I know that both of these views are misconceptions--obstacles which get in the way of real understanding and appreciation of the university by the community, and of the community by the university. The prerequisite to successful dialogue between the university and the community requires that these misconceptions be overcome. It is particularly important that we achieve this today because the future of both the university and the community depends on new bridges of co-operation being built. The University of Winnipeg, with its tradition of active participation in community affairs, can show the lead for others on this important issue.

As one who has had a variety of jobs in the "real world" including: Chartered Accountant Apprentice, Army Officer, Psychologist, Administrator of several Community Service Agencies and United Church Minister, I used to think it would be nice to be a Professor. Teaching university students who are bright and highly motivated to learn would be a pleasure. The job would leave one lots of time for study, and the holidays (all summer) would be exceptional. I have now been in the university as a Professor for some ten years and can say to you with some authority that from the inside, it is all quite different. As a community social service director for four towns in Southern Alberta, I worked hard, with many evening meetings. As a minister, I worked even harder with much longer hours and very little pay. As a professor I have more than adequate pay, but I have worked harder than I did in any of my previous occupations including the ministry. It is true, though, that it is hard to explain what you do during all those hours to people outside the university. My father, a self-educated mortgage, appraisal and real-estate manager is proud that his son is a professor, but he can't understand why I work so hard or exactly what it is I do. When his daughter married a professor, my father-in-law (a farmer) rubbed his hands together at the thought of having a son-in-law with nothing to do between the end of April and the beginning of September--just right for helping with branding, haying and harvesting. To this day he is suspicious about all the time I spend in my study writing, especially from April to September--our time to do research and writing, when I could be out in the fields helping him. Even though

I dutifully send on to both my father and father-in-law copies of my books and journal articles, they remain unimpressed. Books about The Sphota Theory of Language or a 6th Century philosopher named, Bhartrhari, are so theoretical, technical and esoteric that they are received and put away without much comment. My children aren't sure of the worth of my publications either--although when a recent book was issued as a paperback, it seemed that it was closer to being a work worth noting. When it was announced that beginning in September of this year I would be on sabbatical for one year--no classes to teach, no requirement to go in to the university at all--just work at home in my study--the reactions were varied and interesting. My neighbours keep asking how the holiday is going. My father thinks that it is great that I am getting a break, but can't understand why I don't just take it as a holiday--instead of attempting to meet the deadlines of three publishers' contracts. My father-in-law can't believe that they still pay me, even though I don't go in to the university to work.

I mention all this only to illustrate the problem of misunderstanding that exists between the university and the community. For all intents and purposes they are for many people two separate worlds. There are many reasons why this gulf between the two must be overcome. Indeed, if the university does its job correctly, it will find it necessary to build bridges to the community. For its part, the community is finding itself forced to interact more and more closely with the university. Professors today are told that it is not enough to teach their regular credit classes and do their research. As specialists and cultural custodians, they are now expected to take

part in non-traditional forms of teaching, for example in extension courses, public lectures and courses for seniors. Visits to high schools as guest speakers, appearances on radio and t.v. are all part of the obligation of sharing one's expertise with the community--who after all pay the taxes which provide the professor's salary. Professors must also be prepared to speak out as citizens on issues of civic consequence or explain their scholarly work to larger public audiences.[1] All of these new responsibilities are not in place of the traditional teaching, research and publishing roles of the university, but are simply new additions to the job description--requiring additional hours on evenings and weekends, often without additional pay. Today's university has recognized and increased responsibility to the larger community, as exemplified in the theme of this conference "The University in the Inner City." Not all my colleagues willingly take on such added tasks. Many view it as an unwelcome intrusion into their precious research hours. Others argue that their job is to produce pure (highly technical) research that simply cannot be explained or made relevant to the interested layperson. Only with their like-minded highly specialized colleagues can they talk and feel at home. I am happy to report that the above negative attitudes toward the community are not shared by the best of my colleagues. Today it is increasingly being recognized that the professor, in addition to doing highly specialized work, must be willing and able to explain his knowledge with relevance, meaning and interest to a non-specialist public gathering. A major and perhaps regrettably necessary motivation in this regard has been the threat that unless scholars show their teaching and research to be relevant and meaningful to society,

the supporting funding from tax dollars may be removed. It turns out that professors and universities can become very committed to the community and its needs, when their funding is in question. This fact reveals both benefits and dangers in the present dynamic between the university and the community. The benefit is that the university is starting to give up its "ivory tower" role and become a responsible participant in the community. The danger is that when some research or teaching or activity is judged by the public to be out of step with current needs, values or wishes, funding may be cut off, and the search for knowledge shackled by political policy, bureaucratic judgement or public ignorance. Because significant advances in knowledge often necessarily imply a criticism or rejection of current practice, this danger of loss of autonomy is seen to be especially serious by the university. Increased accountability, yet with a safeguarding of the unfettered search for knowledge, is the difficult position of balance which the university, its governing authorities and funding sources must maintain.

On its side, members of the community, the general public, also have responsibilities to meet. Although adult members of community often see a closer connection between learning and living than do students in universities, many view academic study as irrelevant to real life. Others expect the professor or book to provide clear-cut answers to all questions of right and wrong. Between these two extremes are responsible members of the community who see the university as a valuable resource for themselves--in enriching their cultural understanding, their scientific knowledge, sharpening their critical faculties and increasing awareness of the benefits and liabili-

ties of various public policies. Members of the community, like the professors, must show themselves willing to make extra time available for study, for learning, for critical reflection. The community must see to it that financial support for the university is kept at a level which makes such interaction possible. Community programmers, leaders in business and public administrators must become more aware of the resources of the university, and show greater imagination in harnessing these resources.

Senior citizens and those retired would do well to follow the Hindu model of stages of life--with the last two stages being devoted to study, reflection and then teaching the grandchildren. There is a better way than spending one's "golden years" in an endless chase after the sun and golf ball. With time available, no children to look after, and civic contributions made, these last years are tailor made for study and critical reflection. It is encouraging to see more retired people become students each year. Their contribution (from life experience) to the young people in the class often equals that of the professor. To evoke again the dialogue of past years and cultures between old and young in the search for wisdom is a truly golden moment.

Conferences and lectures which bring together members of the university and the city are also an effective means of bridge building between the two communities.

Some of the most exciting bridge building is going on in an area usually thought of as stuffy, rigid and old fashioned. I am speaking of our libraries, both university and public. Surprising as it may seem university research libraries can and often do connect

scholarship with public life. Traditionally university libraries have been conservators of records of the past, and they have mainly served professors and university students. Now an increasing number of university libraries are going public. Not only are they opening their stacks for use by the public, they are going much further and in some instances setting up common listing and loaning systems with the public libraries--in the interest of efficiency, economy and utilizing the possibilities of the new information technologies. "Going public" is not easy for university libraries. Their chief function still remains as the conservation and scholarly use of valuable source materials. But in the past few decades research libraries have recognized that their traditional base of support is limited and they have accepted an obligation to increase access to their collections in return for public financial support. They are reaching out to large audiences through programs for schools and colleges, non-credit classes, interpretive exhibits, lectures and popular publications in fields such as community history, poetry, cartography and genealogy.[2] In short university libraries are becoming centers for using research in non-traditional community oriented learning.

We have sketched in broad outline some of the changes which must take place if the barriers between universities and communities are to be broken down and new bridges put in place. Many of the encouraging developments outlined above are far from being generally accepted within either the university or the community. For many today, the barriers are still in place; the bridges yet to be built. In trying to analyze why this is so, a brief historical review of the relationship between the university and the community may prove helpful.

Universities and Communities: A History of their Developing Relationship

Modern universities developed from the European university of the Middle Ages. They took their name from the latin word "universitas" meaning "a group of people banded together for a common purpose. Originally universities were simply groups of students in the community who came together through common interests and hired teachers to teach them. Thus the first universities were formed and run by community groups of students to satisfy their desire to search for knowledge. In the beginning it was the community that took the initiative to bring the university into being. The detached "ivory tower" university mentality of some modern institutions is the extreme opposite of the original universities which existed in and for the community. These first universities did not specialize but, true to their name, dealt with nearly all fields of study. In England colleges were formed to provide dining and living quarters. Often these quarters were located in removed or retreat type locations away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. While it is true that times of detachment and quiet reflection are needed for scholarly study, it is important that this movement be balanced by a return and active involvement in the life of the community. Perhaps, since I am a scholar of religion, you would allow me two examples from religious experience. The life of Jesus shows a constant alternation between disciplined withdrawal up onto the mountain or out onto the lake for quiet reflection and prayer. Then refreshed and with judgement restored he would again immerse himself in the pressure and crisis of daily life. Likewise Buddha left the life

of a wealthy prince and withdrew for several years of monastic meditation until enlightenment was realized. Then he returned to worldly life full force--stopping wars, teaching and healing the sick. This kind of alternation between withdrawal and engagement is required for us as individuals as it is for institutions like universities.

Returning to our historical outline, here in North America universities divided their courses into various fields of learning called departments. This change laid the foundation for the rather extreme specialization that marks and mars much modern university education. This specialization also became one of the major barriers between the university teachers and the community. Mathematicians could only talk with other mathematicians, philosophers with other philosophers, biologists with other biologists. Specialization into departments has led to isolation between disciplines within the university as well as a rupturing of relationships with the community. If professors and students could not talk across departments due to the narrow and specialized nature of their knowledge how much more difficult for such professors to talk with lay people in the community.

Another modern development is pressure toward job orientation in the university. This has produced a strong vocational thrust so that now much of the limited university resource goes to support professional faculties such as medicine, nursing, engineering, business, law, social work, etc. Instead of attending university to pursue knowledge, many students come with the expectation of obtaining a sure job ticket and good salary for life. When this does not happen, as in today's market, some disillusionment occurs. But also, there is a return by some students to the original purpose of the

university--to obtain a rounded education--which then becomes the basis for other specializations such as medicine or law. This was the older approach and was much superior in that it produced educated doctors and lawyers who could relate to the whole community--and thus often became persons for wise counsel. Today's system too often produces biological, legal, or business technicians devoid of wisdom. Society suffers as a result. The situation will change only when the community judges that such a change is necessary. Since the university curriculum is itself chiefly determined by what the dominant classes of the community consider important to be known, the onus is on the public to require changes in the university.

In his penetrating analysis of the modern university curriculum, the Canadian scholar George Grant argues that the influence of technology is today's biggest challenge.[3] Originally, says Grant, the purpose of education was the search through free insight for what constituted the best life for people in their cities.

> Such education was reserved for the few because free insight was possible only with leisure, and the ancient world could only achieve leisure for some. Such education was concerned not only with human concerns, but with the non-human, because it was thought that man could understand what was best for himself and the species only if he understood the cosmos as a whole.[4]

Knowledge of the whole in the sense of openness to the large and important questions was the point of focus. Specialization removed study from the guiding context of what was good for the whole cosmos--

(including all persons, animals and physical matter) and instead paved the way for a deterioration from concern for the good to a desire for control. The free and open study of Genetics becomes Genetic engineering, Biology-Biological engineering, Psychology-Psychological engineering, the art of medicine-medical mechanics. The dominant desire is to learn how to control physical, animal or human nature. Today's specialists have, to a devastating degree, achieved mastery in this regard. We have the technology to control nature sufficient to cause serious imbalances in our delicate environment. We have the technology to control animal and human genetic make-up and, to a degree, their behaviour. But to what end? And in whose service? From 1900-1905 convocation addresses in universities throughout North America confidently asserted that it was the role of the university, especially the humanities, to teach us to use our immense technological power for good rather than for ill. Politicians, business leaders, anyone in a dilemma, with a hard choice to make began to hire professors as consultants to produce answers. Along with this there was the great progressive hope that as technology advanced, persons in their new-found leisure would use their time and money to become more educated, more cultured. Few of these hopes have been realized. A detailed analysis of why would take us far afield and into questions that remain hotly debated. For now, let us simply observe that increased leisure has produced more culture, but a surfeit of sports (and addendant beer commercials) on television. Rather than an opera house, a symphony hall or a library, the sports superdome has become today's cathedral.

In the realm of knowledge, specialization has given scholars an unassailable status of mastery, but at the cost of surrendering their ability to speak about the larger questions of good and of meaning. Using all kinds of qualifications scholars make limited and specific pronouncements, but are generally unable to achieve the goal of education as set forth by Socrates--to understand what is best for nature, animals and humans, by understanding the cosmos as a whole. Thus the failure of scholars to be able to give wise counsel when turned to by the community for answers to large questions--questions such as what is good for the community, for society, for the universe. The challenge facing all of us today, those of us in the university and those of us in the community is this: how can we escape from the circle of a partial, fragmented, specialized approach to education which leaves us bereft of the resources needed to deal with the large questions of life?

There are some signs that could be read as precursors to a swing of the education pendulum in the opposite direction--away from overspecialization and back to a concern for a larger more balanced curriculum. Harvard University recently instituted a new core curriculum which returns to the old liberal arts model. Urgency to move in this direction has recently come from a report from the American National Commission on Excellence in Education issued in April of this year. The results are alarming. After assessing the quality of teaching and learning in U.S. schools, colleges and universities, the authors conclude that America has been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. While standards in other countries have been rising, those in America have gone down badly.

In the words of the report "Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them."[5] What is the evidence:

- An unbroken decline in college aptitude test scores from 1963-1980. Verbal scores fell over 50 points, math scores dropped 40 points.
- 40% of 17 year olds cannot draw inferences from written material. Only 1/5 can write a persuasive essay. (Our freshman university intake in Canada would be about the same level).
- A steady decline in science achievement scores tested in 1969, 1973 and 1977.
- Business and military leaders report having to spend millions of dollars on remedial educational programs in basic skills such as reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic.

The report concludes, "we are raising a new generation of Americans that is scientifically and technologically illiterate. For the first time in history the educational skills of the current generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach those of their parents." While we may hope that the slide of standards in Canada has not gone as far as the U.S. situation, there is no doubt that our standards too have seriously dropped. Just yesterday a business man in Calgary told me of hiring a high school graduate with an honours record and finding her unable to spell, write or do arithmetic.

In the face of this crises society is showing willingness to support the call of the universities for a return to higher standards in schools. Recently Robertson Davies asserted that the time had arrived for the university to regain its role as the guardian of honour, morals, and excellence. He said "We need a revival of the concept of honour in public and private life, and, in our country I don't know where it is to come from if it does not come from the universities."[6] But without the support of the community, this is a role the universities will be unable to fulfill.

Possibilities for Joint Action

In the final section of my lecture I want to point to two areas where there are exciting possibilities for joint action between the university and the community.

1. The crisis of falling educational standards

The crisis of falling educational standards commands the attention of all of us, whether we are professors attempting to deal with essays with no organization, argument, let alone grammar or spelling, or whether we are business people finding that new employees have to be retaught the basics of reading, writing, computing and critical judgement before they can be put to work. The fall in educational standards must now be front and centre on the agenda of universities, governments, business and community leaders, for should it continue, the very fabric of our society is at risk. It is not a problem that the community can leave to the university, or the university to the community--or both to government. It is a major and urgent problem demanding immediate attention from us all. My hope is that the University of Winnipeg, with its responsiveness to

government and the inner city may take the lead in the tackling of this issue. To fail on this problem, even while achieving success in other areas such as programs for the handicapped or special interest groups would be to win a battle but lose the war. For me, an outsider, to offer suggestions as to how you will tackle this problem in Winnipeg would be both presumptuous and unnecessary. I leave it in your capable hands--as parents, employers, community leaders, university administrators, professors and government officials. But I leave it to you with the plea that you not disappoint tradition of Socrates and the generations before us--that education has as its goals, excellence, care, virtue, and the good of the cosmos.

2. Institutes and the NB role they play

We have noted that a serious problem bedeviling modern universities is specialization into departments, so that problems are no longer approached within the context of the whole. One reason for the creation of institutes is that they can attempt to bring the many specialized departments or disciplines back together by being interdisciplinary or problem centered in their approach. In this way the fragmentation of scholarship can be overcome, and the larger questions of life addressed. This conference is an example of just such an approach, which the presence of the Institute for Urban Studies has made possible. In attendance are scholars from areas like history, religious studies, economics, geography, philosophy, and government leaders, along with business representatives. All are working together to analyze the large question as to how the university and the city should interact for the good of all.

In addition to the interdisciplinary perspective, institutes provide a physical place for withdrawal and reflection. Within the institute scholars and community people can stand back and, from the quiet and balanced atmosphere of the institute study crucial problems.

Scholars pursue their art in the confidence and hope that greater insight will result. True insight is not "merely academic" but incorporates wisdom. The bringing of knowledge and experience together in a sagacious union is the essence of wisdom, and the goal of scholarship. The role of the scholar goes beyond the formation of theory and includes critical and wise application in practice. Having withdrawn into the quiet of the institute and seen the light, the scholar has the responsibility to come forth into the world and attempt to apply the new-found knowledge to the problems of society. We have the responsibility to do this as individual scholars, and as teachers we have the responsibility to help our students do this in their lives. The old adage applies: if you haven't done it yourself, it is unlikely you will be able to teach others to do it. Like individual scholars, institutes have a responsibility to offer the wisdom of university study to the practical problems of society. At the Calgary Institute for the Humanities, for example, community seminars are sponsored each year for exactly this purpose. In 1981 "Calgary's Growth: Bane or Boon?" brought together developers, planners, politicians, law enforcers, community representatives, educators, scholars, and archivists, and in 1982 the "Ethical Issues in the Allocation of Health Care Resources" seminars brought together politicians, deputy ministers, hospital administrators, doctors, nurses, chaplains and community representatives to join with humanists spe-

cialized in the areas. This year the topic "The Use and Abuse of Language" assembled teachers, politicians, lawyers, and electronic mail specialists from Amoco, along with scholars of English and Linguistics. These are not open seminars but are by invitation, and the invitations are extended to the key decision makers in the community on the topic in question. The method adopted is an educational one using a case study approach along with lectures from the scholars. The learning experience proves to be a two way street with the scholars learning from the community participants as well as vice versa.

On a larger scale the Institute has completed a contract research project for the Minister of Post Secondary Education in Alberta. The project involved the study of humanities components in all post-secondary technical and vocational programmes in the Province, and provided the opportunity to make recommendations relating to changes in policy. It is important that institutes undertake such studies, even though they may not always prove to be exciting or inspiring work. Should institutes default on this responsibility, the assessment and recommendation process will be carried out by civil servants who lack the benefit of the critical scholarly perspective. Other institutes have taken up specialized roles in this regard, especially in the area of ethics. While ethical problems in society are amongst the most serious, the provision of a larger framework for the civilized development of policy is seen by the Calgary Institute for the Humanities as the major challenge facing the Humanities today. This issue is not only being examined through contract research. The research of many Institute fellows is directly applicable. Publi-

cations of research projects such as "Nativism and Ethnic Tolerance in Alberta", "A Comparative Study of Sarvodaya and Conscientization", "The Social Origins of Labour Militancy" and "Women and Democratic Theory" (the subject of a recent series of Ideas Network lectures) are now having an impact on current social problems. The Institute's continuing in-house seminar on Science and Human Values is grappling with an issue which has crucial significance for public policy formulation and the future direction of society. The community seminar on "Ethical Issues in the Allocation of Health Care Resources" has led to a pilot project, "Dignity in the Care of the Elderly", pursued jointly by the Institute, the Medical Faculty and the local Auxiliary Hospital and Nursing Home District. Ensuring that dignity and freedom are values that are respected in policy formulation for the care of the elderly is a vital concern when one realizes that in the not-too-distant future over one-half of Canada's population will be in the elderly category.[7] These examples demonstrate that with a little imagination humanists can bring their knowledge to bear on important practical problems. Such applied activities are not only the proper responsibility of scholars and their institutes, they also function to demonstrate the importance and relevance of the university to the politicians and taxpayers. In so doing, the continuation of funding for the academia is secured and the university as the spot from which pure research flows forth is safeguarded. As a secondary effect, applied work justifies otherwise obscure pure research to the society in which we live (and which pays our bills). This is a matter of public policy which scholars and institutes simply cannot afford to ignore.

But this necessary and important practical application of the humanities is not without danger. It requires that the scholar leave the sanctuary of "the university" and venture into the busy world. The danger is that one becomes too caught up in such activities until the insight that sometimes comes only from the perspective of the university is lost. Venturing out into the busy world, we are in danger of losing our clear perception of the whole. Should that happen then we as scholars will have lost the special wisdom which it is our responsibility to contribute.

In a recent talk this point was clearly stated by William Bennett, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.[8] Over involvement in the solution of practical problems not only removes humanists from their core activity, but also runs the risk of promising to contribute more to the formulation of public policy than can be delivered. In Bennett's view, "Promising illumination of particular issues through the humanities is like writing a bad cheque. It will attract takers. But if we write a cheque we can't cover, we shall find the bounce damaging to our reputation."[9] People will support the university best if the extremes of either antiquarian ivory tower detachment or over immersion in the problems of society are avoided. As long as scholars remain true to themselves and at the same time show a responsible attitude to society, support will be forthcoming. Rather than developing policies themselves, the role of scholars is to teach sensitivity to a moral and imaginative framework within which society can develop a civilized public policy.

The role of scholars and institutes is to stand firm at the still point of the turning world. As Eliot put it, by abstention from

movement the light is discerned.[10] Universities and institutes are places for withdrawal and reflection--vantage points from which the pattern in the turning world may be seen. The primary purpose must always be the making possible of pure research by providing the necessary time and environment. Some applied work will also be required, but it must never be allowed to overbalance an Institute's activities to the extent that the sanctuary of the still point is lost. Great books not headlines must remain our point of focus! The maintenance of this tenuous balance between reflective withdrawal and active engagement is perhaps the most serious challenge facing us in the universities and you as our supporting communities.

NOTES

1. The Humanities in American Life. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, p. 111.
2. Ibid., p. 114.
3. George Grant, Technology and Empire. Toronto: Anansi, 1969, pp. 120ff.
4. Ibid., p. 121.
5. A Nation At Risk, Report of the National Commission on Excellence on Education, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., April 1983, p. 6.
6. Robertson Davies, "The Relevance and Importance of the Humanities in the Present Day", p. 9.
7. See Ethical Issues in the Allocation of Health Care Resources, edited by Harold Coward and Donald Larsen. Calgary: The Calgary Institute for the Humanities, 1982.
8. As reported in The Times Higher Education Supplement, January 21, 1983, p. 6.
9. Ibid.
10. T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" in A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry, edited by Oscar Williams. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952.