

KENNETH R. R. GROS LOUIS
(1936-2017)
MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

Ken Gros Louis began his long, varied, and distinguished career at Indiana University with a joint appointment as an assistant professor in the Departments of English and Comparative Literature. He came to Bloomington in 1964 after his education at Phillips Exeter Academy (1955), Columbia University (BA magna cum laude, 1959; MA 1960), and the University of Wisconsin, where he completed his doctorate with a dissertation on versions of the myth of Orpheus in medieval and Renaissance literature. Ken's achievements as a teacher and administrator have obscured his early contributions to the scholarship and understanding of this rich body of writing, which in the 1960s he explored in essays in some of the most important journals of literary studies. In those same years he became known as a strong and versatile teacher of undergraduate and graduate courses, especially of large lecture courses offered to the entire campus. Even before he was awarded tenure, Ken won the Ulysses G. Weatherly award for distinguished teaching in 1970.

Ken's gifts as an academic administrator were also manifested early. He served as assistant chair and then acting chair of Comparative Literature in 1968-70, and he was appointed an associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences in 1970 and chair of the Department of English in 1973, less than a decade after he had joined it as a brand-new assistant professor. He then moved into campus and university administration, serving as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1978 to 1980, when he was appointed as Vice-President of the university and Chancellor of the Bloomington campus. During his tenure as Chancellor he also chaired the Commission on Institutional Cooperation, a consortium of universities in the Big Ten and the University of Chicago, and the governing body of the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago. He retired in 2001, but in 2004 he was called back to serve as Interim Vice-President and Chancellor, titles which were replaced two years later by that of University Chancellor, an office which had been previously held only by Herman B Wells, whom Ken regarded as a mentor and who for him as for many others served as a model of leadership in a big public university.

Ken once described university administrators as "facilitators, expeditors, implementers of academic priorities." He knew more intricately than almost anyone how the university and the campus worked, and he put his command of its machinery and politics steadily in the service of colleagues who wanted to change or invent ways in which knowledge is made and taught. As chair and dean he looked for ways to connect the university with communities off campus, as in a program in which his faculty colleagues in English taught courses in some of the state's prisons. As dean and chancellor he enabled or nourished the development of new departments and schools, such as those in informatics and communication. He closely attended to the appointment and advancement of women and minority members of the faculty, and his support of the center for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students was crucial to its creation. He thought that undergraduate education was central to the purposes of the university; he commissioned several studies of the undergraduate curriculum, and he consistently, if not always successfully, tried to create first-year seminars to introduce students to the practices and pleasures of liberal learning. He always made time and created opportunities to meet with students, and he kept in touch, to the very end of his life, with the student leaders he had known and counseled during the decades of his leadership. He brought to all this hard work his wit and gift for easy familiarity. When he supported a program in which faculty members regularly dined with students in residence halls, he often joined them. At one memorable event (I was there), an amateur night in Briscoe Quad, he entertained by tap dancing while twirling a baton lit at both ends with live flames.

Throughout his decades in administration Ken remained a teacher of literature. In 1974, along with James Ackerman in Religious Studies, he edited and contributed to a two-volume collection of essays on the

interpretation of the Bible as literature. He wrote a couple of very interesting essays on the requirements of this kind of study, one of which won an award from the journal of Biblical studies in which it was published. Until the end of his long tenure in the office of Chancellor he conducted each year a seminar for Wells scholars on *King Lear* or other plays of Shakespeare. And he was well-known for his recitation of poetry at every commencement and any other public event during which he could fit in a poem, converting the occasion into a kind of classroom in which he demonstrated how literature illuminates the puzzles and satisfactions of ordinary living.

The purpose of higher education, Ken wrote in an essay early in his service as a vice-president, is to provide a “training in vision.” By that he meant the ability “to see complexly,” to recognize patterns of meaning and connection in what other people believe and do, and to understand ourselves and our own ways of living with other people. Michael Wilkerson, who worked with Ken in the Chancellor’s office, wrote in a fine tribute published in the local newspaper that Ken was thinking of writing a book titled “The Poetry of Administration.” By that Ken might have meant that he learned from literature, and from his long experience in its exercise, lessons in the availing or the reckless uses of authority. “Everything you need to know is in *King Lear*,” he said. (Michael Wilkerson adds that Ken also mentioned Machiavelli.) And Ken might also have meant that his practice as a reader and critic of literature had helped him to see connections, to understand motives, and, like a good teacher, to lead others to make good on their own possibilities and ambitions.

Donald Gray
Culbertson Professor of English Emeritus
Indiana University Bloomington

Ken Gros Louis was a gifted and subtle mentor. He didn’t impose or dictate. You learned by watching and listening, by marveling at his convocation and commencement addresses and delighting in his whimsy and wit. The university he imagined and loved was purer and less dispersed than the institution has become. Its purpose, he conveyed, is to preserve what is known, to test that knowledge continually, to reject what is no longer valid and to create and share new knowledge; to promote and protect inquiry and the exchange of ideas; and to enable students to learn ways of listening, thinking, knowing and doing that they can apply in their life and work. That was the Indiana University he helped create for generations of colleagues and students. It was a wonder to have enjoyed a career under his guidance.

Trevor Brown
Professor and Dean Emeritus, School of Journalism IUB

It was my privilege to know Ken both personally and professionally and to work with him as an associate dean when he was Dean of the College.

One of Ken’s most endearing qualities was his self-deprecating sense of humor. He did not like to drive and was a self-admitted mediocre, at best, driver, which might account for him finding that he was driving on an expired license, two years expired. As he told the story, he discovered that he would have to take a written test to get the license renewed. “How hard could that be? No need to study,” he thought. At the license branch at that time the written test was taken standing up at a counter with ten or fifteen other applicants. Ken handed in his test and a few minutes later heard his name shouted out for everyone to hear, “Gros Louis, Gros Louis. You failed!” True to one of Ken’s other character traits, competitiveness, he studied and scored a 100% the next time, including, as he noted, all seven sign shapes.

To students about to graduate, Ken often quoted part of the T. S. Eliot poem, "Little Gidding," including the lines:

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning

The end is where we start from

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

It was so in Ken's character to use poetry to make such an apt point and to illuminate for students the meaning of the term "commencement." However, because Ken would occasionally circulate copies of his remarks around the office, he received from the associate deans either full-on parodies of the poem or comments such as, "I understand that there is a beginning and an end. What happened to the middle?" or, "I finally get it. Life is like a revolving door. You go round and round and never get anywhere." No one appreciated these efforts more than Ken.

When I joined the College office, Ken began the first meeting with the four associate deans by joking, "As it is Jim's first meeting, we will dispense with the oath of fealty to me." For those who knew him, no oath was required. It did not take long for me and others to develop an intense loyalty to him, a loyalty based not only on personal qualities such as his warmth and generosity, but also on his vision for the university, a vision that included education and the search for knowledge with the students, the staff, and the faculty, at its very center.

James Craig
Chancellor's Professor
Department of Psychology and Brain Science
Indiana University Bloomington

When Ken Gros Louis died, I lost a friend and a mentor, as did many women on the faculty. Back in 1972, while he was preparing to chair the English Department, Ken invited me to campus for an interview. Visibly pregnant, I traveled from Chicago to meet the predominantly male faculty and returned home with Ken's assurance that a formal offer would be forthcoming. Only years later did he tell me that a senior professor had arrived in his office to say, "Why, you can't hire her . . . given her condition!" The story always made us laugh, but it underscored his dedication to continue hiring women and also to furnish the support we would need when we were tokens in the academic community.

Laughter was part of that sustenance. He used it to good effect when he encountered opposition in a series of spousal hires that strengthened the department. He evoked it when at the holiday get-togethers of our families, he would serve as time-keeper in the game of charades . . . without a watch. Whether he was weaving lines of verse into an awards ceremony or providing one-sentence bios for a host of colleagues at their retirement event, Ken relished the occasion and welcomed his audience to join him in doing so as well. When my mother reached the age of eighty, Ken sent her eighty roses.

In his dedication to his two daughters—he penciled them into his work calendar with fictitious names so as to preserve quality time for them—Ken served as a role model, as he did again quite late in his administrative career when he continued to teach undergraduate classes in literature. He will be sorely missed. The Madwoman in the Attic and the Norton Anthology of Literature by Women would never have been conceived or composed if Ken had not brought Sandra M. Gilbert and me together in Bloomington.

Susan Gubar
Distinguished Professor Emerita
Department of English
Indiana University Bloomington

Ken Gros Louis was a gifted literary critic who brought his insights to bear on the Bible years before the “literary approach” had found a place in biblical studies. He came to IU in the mid-60’s, trained in the “new criticism” that had arisen as a corrective against prior scholarship’s focus on how a text had been influenced by its historical and cultural environment. Unlike biblical scholars of that time, who fragmented a text into its antecedent sources as a way of tracing historical changes within Israel’s cultural institutions, Ken analyzed the final form of each episode, including how it functioned within a larger literary whole. He brought his readers into the world of the narrative, leaving all historical or archaeological or sociological or theological questions behind. He assumed a reliable narrator who told stories in which God functioned as a character. This was at first regarded as heresy by many biblical scholars, who viewed approaching biblical narratives as part of a unified text with a single implied narrator as a new form of fundamentalism. “Bible as literature,” however, has finally gained acceptance as a recognized subfield within biblical studies. And Ken played a more important role in that development than one may at first surmise.

Ken’s research on the Bible was published in two volumes, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Abingdon), that he edited: his 1974 book included nine studies he had written, and he published seven more essays in his 1982 volume. The context for his research was his role lecturing in ten summer institutes for teachers of English throughout the 1970’s, concluding with an NEH summer institute for college teachers in 1979. All in all, this decade of institutes reached almost five hundred teachers from all fifty states, and included five foreign countries. The teachers were unanimous in their praise of Ken’s lectures; one could almost say they were in awe.

Very soon there was a response to these volumes from both literary critics and biblical scholars. A handful of biblical scholars struggled at first to use this new (to us) approach, stumbling as we proceeded. The most influential response came from a literature scholar, Robert Alter, from UC Berkeley. He submitted an impressive critical review of Ken’s first volume in *Commentary* and then came to the IU institute to lecture. Until then Alter had focused his research and writing on the picaresque novel, never on the Bible. After that, however, he published two volumes on biblical poetics and seven volumes of translation and critical notes covering all the books of the Hebrew Bible.

Ken’s influence on the field of the Bible as literature went beyond his teaching in the institute and his two Abingdon Press volumes. When he was chancellor of the Bloomington campus, Ken facilitated the hiring of a young PhD candidate in English and Comparative Literature from Yale, Herb Marks, whose entire career at IU has focused on “Bible as literature.” Herb created the IU Press’s “Indiana Literary Biblical Series,” which “will approach the Scriptures from a literary-critical perspective in both commentaries and thematic volumes.” The series has made major contributions to this newly-developing field (twenty-one volumes so far), leading off with

Meir Sternberg's 570-page classic *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1985). In 2012, Marks published his own 2280-page Norton Critical Edition masterpiece, *The English Bible: King James Version/The Old Testament*. (The New Testament companion volume [2012] was co-edited by literary scholar Gerald Hammond of Manchester and Austin Busch, one of Herb's students.)

Ken is best known for his skills as an administrator and his major contributions to IU and higher education in that role. His role in influencing biblical studies is not as well known, but his seminal contributions to that field of study are important and lasting.

James Ackerman
Emeritus Professor, Department of Religious Studies
Indiana University Bloomington