



Elliott Coleman, Charles Plymell.

So I wasn't the typical, young graduate entering the Seminars. From my life experiences, I knew when I met a great man. I sensed that Mr. Coleman wanted to know what I was about, and I wanted to know what he and his scene was about. Simple as that! But probably more lay inherently deep in the marrow of the institution of Hopkins. He was of the old school, the last of the moderns, by that I mean he could have held his own with all the names in literature in all the old canons of the academe. His work was not easily classified in the surrealism/metaphysics of the day and remained almost intentionally obscure. For he was a spirit, a light, for not only the privileged, for he made no such distinctions; yet, those upon whom his presence was cast sensed they were privileged. He was traditionally generous as well, making sure to bring our family a Thanksgiving turkey we shared with another writer family in the student ghettos. His spirit would have been immediately noted among the elite or the tramp. He would illuminate any hobo camp or faculty meeting. His generosity and demeanor reminded me of another writer friend of his age with whom I had a similar relationship, William Burroughs. He was gracious and therefore hard to "get at." We tried. The ornery students tried to get "one up on him" in the Seminar room, but he always put us in our place, even if he did show signs of desiring his afternoon cocktail a bit early. He was mischievous too and delighted in having me dine with him and the other movers and shakers in the faculty room, waiting for me to say something off color, or maybe tell a joke he could slap his knee and laugh at.

I got the distinct impression he was wise enough with words to name his child "the Writing Seminars" — not creative this or that. He did know words and any writing is creative unless one is a scribe. (Or typist! Ha! He would have loved the fiasco I was in when Kerouac met Capote.) In that respect, he was ahead of them all. He loved good writing and produced students who became known in journalism; political satire; short stories, etc. The genre didn't matter. His purpose was to make the adolescent writers grow up. His method seemed mostly to let them go at each other, but as grown-ups. One dared not fall below that line. On that he had a tight hold and the punishment for overstepping that was one's own awareness of one's own regression that he would signal by retort or expression. Punishment

indeed. The old methods that endeared him were pretty much decimated as new writing industry took over. It seemed a time in history that all things began to change for the surging population: the factory farm, agribusiness slaughter houses, futures, fame, writers like Snooky visiting campuses for the same honorarium as a Nobel Laureate! He would have slapped his knee over that! There was an all too familiar analogy emerging in the “departments.” It was no longer operated by its founder with the help of one secretary. It would become an industry. There would be no need for an Elliott Coleman.

I HEARD THE OMEN from parents on graduation day standing behind me. They complained there were no big monetary rewards awaiting their kids after shelling out big bucks. The government stepped in just in time. It would change the field forever creating its own audience to recycle itself. There would be more yield but the spirit would be sucked dry. Let me use an analogy that destroyed the plains, the cowboy, the fields of the dry land prairie rancher and small farmer and his gods of wind and rain. "... the elemental gist of unwall'd winds..." (Hart Crane) to curse or pray to and make up his person. The kids I knew from those fields now park their Cessnas (bought with our tax money) behind their houses and their John Deeres in front. Their families had enough acreage that the government subsidized them with tens of thousands, yes, hundreds of thousands to let their land lie fallow. There was too much poetry, er.wheat. They used our tax money to ride around in Cadillacs (not Subarus) to enjoy their fallow acreage of poetry.er, wheat. When subsidized, they started using our tax money to put in irrigation wells which created more wheat.er, more poets. By doing so they sucked the great Ogallala Aquifer dry. (The great spirit water of life and poetry.) Then they paid with our tax money for places (programs) to store the wheat until it could reach the market or speculators, or rats, or whatever. Anyway there are parts of the analogy that would correspond to giving poets money to make more poetry, storage (programs), a fallow audience, a moldy poetry. An analogy works as good as its parts. Elliott knew this. It is not the simple comparisons they teach kids in our mis-education system. The language is gone, literature is gone.

Poetry is gone. Elliott Coleman is gone! Ha! Sorry, Elliott, I *so* need you sitting in that chair at the head of the table to let me become aware of where I am wrong!

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Image Credit: George H. Cook/Sun Photo In 1947 ELLIOTT COLEMAN founded the Hopkins Writing Seminars, which was only the second such program in the country. Dr. Coleman, who published 18 volumes of poetry and essays, continued to chair the department until his retirement 30 years later. He was a mentor to many American writers who later gained prominence,

including Russell Baker, A&S 1947, who won the Pulitzer Prize for *Growing Up*, and John Barth, A&S 1951, 1952 (MA), who won the National Book Award for *Chimera*. Son of an Episcopal minister, Professor Coleman studied theology at Oxford University and the General Theological Seminary in New York City. He was ordained a deacon in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, but shortly after his father's death, Dr. Coleman entered the publishing business. He went on to become a prolific and admired writer, as well as beloved teacher. Professor Coleman died in 1980.