

## 7 Lou LaBrant: A Challenge and a Charge

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Lou LaBrant  
1888-1991\*

Some lives are much fuller than others, and some lives are blessed with greater longevity. Very infrequently we come upon a person who, like Lou LaBrant, enriches individual lives and a whole profession with great productivity, a fullness of spirit, and an indelible impact born of high standards and insightful passion for teaching. To have had Lou LaBrant active in our profession for over eight decades leaves us with a full life and a wealth of writing to consider, and a depth of insight to capture in these few pages. Her longevity almost defies relegation to a particular period; LaBrant has been involved with the

National Council of Teachers of English throughout most of its history, and active in English education through five decades (1930-70). But what a rich opportunity and challenge it is to reflect upon that life.

Beginning with her first interest in NCTE in the 1920s, LaBrant was a visible, outspoken, and active woman in what was a man's world professionally. To be a woman and to have impact, one had to excel—and be persistent. In those ways, LaBrant was much like the other NCTE leaders whose lives are told in this volume. The role and visibility of women in the Council would change during her lifetime, though LaBrant herself would remain much the same: passionately advocating what she believed in, intellectually active, unfailingly committed to the highest standards. Her pedagogy would remain constant, too, over five decades. What always mattered to Lou LaBrant

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\*As this book goes to press we are deeply saddened to learn of the passing of Lou LaBrant, at age 102, on February 25, 1991, in Lawrence, Kansas.

was what young people could do with and through language. She spent a lifetime exploring with teachers how young people could grow and express themselves as readers and writers and speakers. To say that for LaBrant the child should be the focus of the curriculum would only understate what she always took for granted.

This portrait of Lou LaBrant will begin with a brief biographical overview: dates and places; positions, honors, and roles; some of the important when's and where's in her life. Then our attention will turn to the woman—not just *who* she was and is, but *what* she was and is, both personally and professionally.

Our study of Lou LaBrant's life, our talks with her and with some who knew her well, and our reading of her work have led us to recognize several broad themes in her personal and professional life. We believe hers has been a remarkable life. We trust that what we say about her high standards, her respect for and belief in individuals, her independence and initiative, her understanding of language, her passion for literature, her lifelong learning, and her clear perspectives on the teacher's role and potential will help readers begin to understand and respect Lou LaBrant as we do.

For LaBrant, being a centenarian has been lively and also a little bit lonely. Even after she was a hundred years old, LaBrant would not give the impression of being a woman with whom one would want to trifle. She has her sense of humor, to be sure, and the eyes sparkle. But when her longtime friend and former student, Frank Jennings, described her as a teacher, we could definitely picture her in this role: "She was demanding, charming, winsome, tough, and no nonsense—all those things at once. She would cut your heart out if you were impudent, dishonest, or sloppy in your work or thinking" (1989).

This insight into LaBrant suggests potentially confusing paradoxes. On the one hand, she is exceptionally respectful of teachers' abilities to make their own decisions and to conduct learning wisely. Her works are similarly permeated with respect for students as individuals, and by her defense of students' rights to read, think, write, and speak independently. She could display passion for the oppressed, exhibit sensitivity to language and to the connections between language and our humanity, and show unrestrained love for books, for those who read them well, and for those who write books she feels are worth reading. Her sense of humor has lasted into her eleventh decade. (When we told her in the spring of 1989 that we were looking forward to seeing her in November at the 1989 NCTE Convention in Baltimore, she chuckled and said, "Don't worry about me. Just make sure you hold on long enough to make it.")

At the same time, LaBrant could apply that trenchant wit with a cutting edge, showing little respect for those she respected little. She could be outspokenly blunt and aggressive. One intimate suggested "abrasive" in describing LaBrant in committee work. She was bright, usually right, ahead of her time—and she knew it. LaBrant often showed little restraint in expressing exactly where she stood. Moreover, she would often let an audience know she believed the rest of the world should be standing right there with her.

Her niece and nearest living relative, Betty Fiehler, stated that LaBrant "really did not like women" (1989). We would soften that statement to indicate that LaBrant really did not like *most* women, nor was she sympathetic to women who settled for a back seat in the profession. She, after all, had made *her* own way. Yet, she did have close personal friends among professional women and was not so fond of males that she ever found one she wished to marry. . . . The paradoxes abound.

Lou LaBrant was born in 1888 in Hinckley, Illinois. She grew up, along with her brother and sister, in small midwestern communities. She began teaching in a "dusty" Kansas cattle town following her own high school graduation at age fifteen. She soon enrolled at Baker University, majoring in Latin with a "weak minor" in English. Because her father had recently died, she immediately resumed her teaching career in order to help support her mother and sister. Though having a job was a necessity, LaBrant was unwilling to compromise in order to get one. Upon learning that her initial contract would be for ten dollars a month less than that offered a man hired for the same position at that time, LaBrant refused the offer until it was changed to her satisfaction.

So it was that LaBrant's independence of spirit and sense of equity were obvious very early in her professional life. Upon her terms she was hired as a new teacher and was instructed by the principal to "get that school accredited." Doing "the English part of it," she said, "was easy. I was the only English teacher, and had a good sense of how things ought to go." But in this first job, Lou LaBrant, not yet twenty-five years old and not having majored in English or in education, had a whole school to get into shape, and that meant having the math and science teachers replaced. They were, she put it simply, "incompetent" (LaBrant 1989a).

In the early 1920s LaBrant continued her education at the University of Kansas, where she received her master's degree in 1925. She was awarded a doctorate by Northwestern University in 1932. The Ohio State University Laboratory School was then being developed, so LaBrant joined the staff and took part in its beginnings. The program

was experimental in that teachers and professors could develop curriculum from the ground up. LaBrant was able to apply successfully her ideas of free and wide reading of literature and to challenge assumptions behind traditional English programs. It was during this time that her first book, *The Teaching of Literature in the Secondary School* (1931b) was published, a book she described as "radical at the time" in a 1977 interview with Alfred H. Grommon, chair of the Commission on the History of the Council. Partly as a result of LaBrant's contributions to the Laboratory School program, the students themselves also authored a book, *Were We Guinea Pigs?* (University High School 1938), which described their experiences in many experimental programs. During LaBrant's tenure at Ohio State she edited *Educational Method* for four years.

In 1942 LaBrant received an invitation to go to New York University. She was undaunted by the prospects of metropolitan life and of teaching in an urban setting despite her small-town upbringing. It was the stated practice of the university to hire new faculty members as associate professors and then, as the appropriate time arose, to offer full professorships. LaBrant discovered, however, that very often the appropriate time arose only for men, so she declined the offer. LaBrant was then hired by NYU at the rank of professor. Her first summers in the East were spent teaching at Harvard and the Breadloaf School, where she knew Robert Frost. LaBrant remained at NYU until her *first* retirement at age sixty-five.

Taking a rather dim view of retirement, LaBrant chose to continue teaching, and she moved to Atlanta University for two years as a visiting professor. During that time she served as president of the NCTE (1953-54). Following a short term at the University of Missouri, LaBrant, at age seventy, went to Dillard University in New Orleans, where she felt she might be able to offer some assistance in the educational preparation of black teachers. She did so—first as a professor of English and later as head of the Division of Humanities—for eleven years, with the exception of two or three years which she spent traveling in Europe. After her second retirement at age eighty, LaBrant remained ten more years in New Orleans before returning to her childhood home of Baldwin City, Kansas, where she resides at this writing (November 1989) remarkably on her own, at age 101. We will draw frequently from a long and pleasant interview with LaBrant in Baldwin City in April of 1989 in the following discussions of her life.

During her rich career, LaBrant was the recipient of many honors. She received an honorary doctorate from Baker University in 1941

and was named emeritus professor by New York University in 1953 and by Dillard University in 1969. NCTE's W. Wilbur Hatfield Award was bestowed upon her in 1962. In various years LaBrant was included in such listings as *Who's Who*, *Who's Who in Education*, *Who's Who in the East*, *Personalities of the South*, and *World's Who's Who among Women*.

At this writing LaBrant continues writing, publishing essays (as recently as the spring of 1989 at age 101) and corresponding with friends of many years. She is still an avid and wide reader. According to her niece, Betty Fiehler (1989), "There is a good bookstore in [nearby] Lawrence, Kansas, and she just calls them periodically and tells them to send her whatever she wants—and if they haven't got it, she tells them to find it." She still talks of traveling again—perhaps, as a longtime friend informs us, because she is bored with Baldwin City. Fiehler, too, reports that LaBrant "complains about the intellect" in her housing complex because "there isn't anybody interesting enough to talk to" (Fiehler 1989). With the exception of swollen knees that creak when she gets up and down, Fiehler asserts that LaBrant's good health still allows her to have eggs and bacon every morning for breakfast and to spend hours quietly reading during the day. She remains the independent woman she has always been. Today, though, LaBrant would disagree with Robert Browning's view that 101 is "the best." Given the former pace of her life, all that she had been and all that she had seen, LaBrant would admit that "101 is a bit lonely."

Frank Jennings was right in his assessment: Lou LaBrant *was* tough. Throughout her *English Journal* contributions, she extolled the profession, challenging teachers to be all that they could be and to be better than they were. Being better meant staying informed, resisting orthodoxy and tradition for their own sake, and being independent. LaBrant would tell teachers, "As a teacher of English, I am not willing to teach the polishing and adornment of unimportant writing," and enjoined the profession to resist "the dubious privilege of spending our best efforts to produce more conventionally stated futility" (1946a, 123).

There was a consistently demanding edge to LaBrant's many challenges to teachers: "I believe, then, that the teacher should know the agony of putting words on paper. We have some pretty careless talk about writing for fun" (1955, 245). Because she worked so hard at her own writing, as demonstrated by the clear, measured, and pointed precision of her own prose, Lou LaBrant knew full well that good writing was neither easy nor fun. She was impatient with teachers who did not think about that or know it from experience. For LaBrant, the

only writing worth worrying over was writing which said something worth saying. That standard went for her students, as well as for those published authors whose writings she read.

LaBrant lived and wrote through a period of "soft pedagogies" frequently mistaken as appropriate applications of progressive education. Putting the child in the center of the curriculum could be misconstrued to mean that the child's needs to have fun and to play must be addressed in the English classroom. LaBrant saw it differently. To address a child's intellectual needs did not mean pandering to the child. Thus, telling boys and girls "writing is fun" just would not do. LaBrant wrote and worked hard at her writing and would consequently reason that only those who worked similarly hard could understand how growth through writing could be trivialized in the pursuit of "fun."

Not every teacher of English was equally intelligent or thoughtful in LaBrant's view, and she did little to keep her disdain for lazy teachers to herself. She would frequently suggest distinctions in teachers' qualities by appealing only to those who were both professionally inclined and intelligent. She believed such teachers naturally made choices—and that they had better be good ones. "Every intelligent teacher of English," she once wrote, "knows that his program is a selection" (1959, 295).

Lou LaBrant's views on professionalism were not from the top down, from the ivory tower to the classroom. Indeed, the title of her most enduring work is *We Teach English* (1951), and a major theme in that book is that "we" are part of a profession in which there are high expectations and great responsibilities. LaBrant challenged teachers to be models and to set the highest standards: "We need to display by our very living that we believe in the importance of language as man's highest achievement and in literature as a record of life" (1959, 303).

The assumption that the best teachers acted on knowledge—and the fervent belief that all teachers must learn to act on what was known about teaching and learning—was a common theme in LaBrant's frequent calling of teachers to a higher plane. In a 1939 publication with her Ohio State colleague, Frieda M. Heller, LaBrant wrote, "Understanding is fostered by the study of child development and psychology. It is not sufficient that the librarian know the listed studies of reading interests. . . it is important also that she know about the physical, mental, and psychological development of children. *That the teacher of English should know this also would seem to go without saying*" (LaBrant and Heller 1939b, 81; emphasis added).



James Squire, executive secretary of NCTE from 1960 to 1967, greatly admires LaBrant and was always fascinated by her manner. He termed the following story "famous in its day." "At a late thirties NCTE conference, a teacher asked LaBrant how any teacher could ever read all those books to help students in their wide reading of literature." From the podium, LaBrant responded, "Well, if you haven't read the books, you ought to take a year off and go home and read them so you're fit to be an English teacher!" (Squire 1989).

LaBrant could be blunt and direct, wise and right, and maintained unfailingly high standards for her profession. Her teaching colleagues and students must have known this, though for some their tenure with her was brief. She once refused to allow two women to take one of her courses because, though they were "undoubtedly lovely people," her previous experience with them indicated that they were not suited to working with children. Nice ladies or not, if they did not measure up academically and intellectually, LaBrant simply would not have them in her classes. Frank Jennings echoed this in remarking that LaBrant would have nothing to do with poorly prepared or ill-equipped people entering the profession (1989).

Precisely because of these high expectations for students and teachers, Jennings was able to say that LaBrant "makes teachers better than anyone I've ever met. Her students are damn useful in the profession" (1989). Because of her, countless teachers in the profession would learn what their highest callings were time and time again for eighty years. The lessons were not always painless or easy to accept. LaBrant was demanding.

It would be too simple merely to balance the toughness LaBrant displayed by establishing that she also "respected the individual." She clearly believed in an individual's potential worth—but she believed just as strongly that to deserve respect, one must earn it by making the most of one's potential. LaBrant saw her role as an educator as helping learners earn self-respect and the respect of others through the power of language.

A reader of *We Teach English* quickly recognizes that LaBrant was never much interested in teaching "English" or any of the traditional aspects of it. That 1951 work captures the best of an innovator's vision first employed decades earlier at the Ohio State University Laboratory School. Like all LaBrant's works, this book suggests that LaBrant was devoted to nurturing the minds of students, increasing their critical capabilities, and helping them live in and understand a world she frequently would say was "at risk." Similarly, LaBrant spoke and wrote often about the "teaching" mind and potential of teachers. Thus, this

strong theme of respect for individuals emerges from her work in two related ways: She respected the ability of students to learn, often largely on their own, and she respected the ability of thoughtful teachers to teach—again, often on their own. She believed that teachers *and* students could have too much of certain kinds of prescriptively spoon-fed help.

In her 1961 *English Journal* discussion of "The Rights and Responsibilities of the Teacher of English," LaBrant cast both teachers and students in the same light as she wrote, "A teacher or student without the urge to know more is doomed to fall behind" (381). She argued strongly that teachers freed from the constraints of conventionality could indeed get their jobs done and succeed in inspiring young minds to significant learning. She wrote, "Throughout our country today we have great pressure to improve our schools. By far, too much of that pressure leads toward a uniformity, a conformity, a lock-step which precludes the very excellence we claim to desire." Further, she argued, there is "little consideration of the teacher as a catalyst, a changing, growing personality" (383, 391).

Because she herself was the embodiment of the lifelong learner, LaBrant challenged teachers to think and act independently as they continued to grow and to learn. She firmly believed that thinking teachers would find their own best ways. Beyond the contemporary ring and appeal of LaBrant's early message on teachers' rights, contemporary readers of LaBrant's works will here again be reminded of her faith in and respect for teachers as individuals.

To deal with language and literature in significant ways, to enable learners to sense the liberating power of language, and to nurture growth in writing demanded the very best of the profession. LaBrant not only believed teachers could, but also that they *must*, work things out for themselves. But she believed just as adamantly that lazy or passive teachers, or teachers who allowed themselves to think or write without precision, would never meet the challenges she saw in teaching.

It was her beliefs about teaching literature that clearly demonstrated Lou LaBrant's trust in individuals to find their own way. Her own high school experience with a master teacher ("the best I *ever* had or knew") convinced LaBrant that teachers can "teach" too much. "He would come in and introduce us to a piece of significant literature," LaBrant recalled seventy-five years later, "but really not tell us much about it at all. He would set us to reading and discussing it, and come back some time later to see what we had made of the piece. We all seemed to learn a great deal that way and were about as 'typical' a



group, I suspect, as one could get. I never quite got over it!"(1987b). Later, when she translated her own learning experiences into a pedagogy for teaching literature, she was decades ahead of those who would devote primary attention to readers' responses to literature.

LaBrant learned early that her own responses to literature could be trusted and reliable—as well as changed and stretched in dialogue with others. She learned in her own education that the teacher's role could go well beyond pouring out content and explicating the difficult passages worthwhile literature presented. Thoughtful readers could do that for themselves, given time, only a little guidance, and other thoughtful readers with whom to talk.

Such were the lessons from her youth—from her father, who had inculcated wide reading and discussion, and from her high school experience with that one unforgettable master teacher. Later she would find a kindred spirit in Louise Rosenblatt and would continue to grow herself, both as a teacher of literature and as a reader of many types of literature. LaBrant's passion for literature and how it ensured her lifelong learning will be considered in more detail later.

Imagine, though, reader response in a small Kansas high school in the early 1900s. Imagine LaBrant in that classroom. The teacher she would become over the next eight decades, a teacher who trusted and empowered readers, is then easier to understand. LaBrant was ahead of her time with her emerging literary pedagogies, but she had learned from someone even further ahead of his time.

Only a teacher who would respect individuals would write, "A teacher who finds the classroom dull must be talking too much. The authors we read," LaBrant would go on to argue, "must have been sufficiently proficient at saying what they wanted to say, or we would not be talking about their works so much" (1987b). Teachers, she contended, are not as necessary as they might think in explaining and interpreting literature to students who could read on their own and who were excited about learning. Her long-standing advocacy of free reading, and of reading freed from a pedant's regurgitation and interpretation, was born in a Kansas high school in the early 1900s.

Drawing from what students knew and building on what they could do on their own was fundamental to LaBrant. She also believed that boys and girls would *want* to learn on their own; she respected individuals too much to assume they would be disinterested in language and ideas. In an article on vocabulary development, she wrote: "We can encourage the use of what the student knows, deepen his understanding of the possibilities in a word (poetry is ideal for this), open his eyes to the simple ways for learning new words ... and teach

him to respect the words he speaks and writes. The drive to lift his vocabulary will then be his own" (1944, 480). In a later article on writing instruction, LaBrant expressed the same kind of faith in teachers to be self-directed when she wrote that "any imaginative teacher can work out a program with a class" once freed from the constraints of "practical writing," which she felt should be "dismissed with quickly" (1959, 296, 302).

LaBrant was frustrated by the two extremes between which she found herself, and her frustration forced her to become a reformer in writing instruction as well as in literature instruction. In both instances her respect for the individual was the key. To her right LaBrant saw those who advocated drill and skill and grammar and mechanics and correctness and surface structure. To her left were those who saw free self-expression (and "fun" in achieving it) as the goal of instruction. Certainly those poles are familiar to those who follow the course of writing instruction in our schools, both yesterday and today. LaBrant's refusal to trivialize writing with concerns for correctness only or with the merely expressive impulses of writers was founded in her belief that, properly challenged, young people *would* think significantly and *would* express themselves well in writing. She felt that focusing on mechanics was "incidental" and that pandering to undisciplined self-expression was "pointless." She would give in to neither.

For LaBrant, respecting individuals went beyond considering their capacity for growing through language and had implications for life and for issues outside the classroom. It was this same abiding respect for the quality of the individual mind that found LaBrant speaking out against implicit or explicit segregation long before doing so was popular. It was her belief that we must learn to teach individual students and believe in their ability to learn that made her a quiet, but increasingly persistent, advocate of human rights, respect, and responsibility.

Max Bogart, a former student, recalled that LaBrant had a great influence on minority students. Few blacks were in northern universities until after World War II, when they began to come from the South for summer sessions. According to Bogart, LaBrant would seek out minority students and teach them not only linguistics, but how to be self-respecting human beings. "She told them not to sit in the balcony, but to sit downstairs with the white people when they went to the theater—to sit at the front of the bus. They adored her as the rest of us did" (1989). In affirmation of her belief in quality education for minorities, James Squire stated that during her years of teaching in

black universities in the South, she succeeded in "holding the teachers there to the same high standards she's always had" (1989).

In 1946 LaBrant's concern for equality surfaced clearly in an article on semantics entitled "The Words of My Mouth," in which she asserted, "Classifications which result in racial or cultural segregation, encouragement of small cliques, avoidance of crucial issues—all these may do evil in the English class" (1946b, 327). What is worse, she argued, English teachers might be contributors to needless, harmful classifications through grouping students on the basis of "test scores" or by referring to and thinking about students in groups. "Do the words we use influence how we view others?" she asked. Answering her own question with an emphatic "Of course!" she went on to explain how teachers might guard against their own prejudices and help students understand how words shaped how they thought about themselves and others. She concluded, "for what is the study of English but the search for meanings and the methods for expressing them?" (327).

Though she did spend over a decade teaching at Dillard, LaBrant was never known to talk or act or write as if she were a white messiah. However, given changes in demographics, social and economic needs, and teacher shortages in major cities, one might speculate about where LaBrant might be most active today: it is easy to imagine her preparing teachers for inner-city schools or teaching in an urban school herself.

As a teacher, as a professor, and as an NCTE president, Lou LaBrant retained a strong faith in individuals. In her 1953 NCTE presidential message she stated, "The reading, listening man learns today from the whole world; his own words affect the whole world." She challenged the Council to "the sincere, devoted, teaching of how to read, speak, write, and listen." Strength and progress in the Council would be measured, she said, "by the events in your own classrooms" (1954, 119).

The faith and belief she expressed both in teachers' minds and in their teaching of minds was predicated on freedom for students and for teachers alike. But freedom, LaBrant once wrote, "is something we rewin every day, as much a quality of ourselves as it is a concession of others" (1961, 391). It was through the teaching and learning of language that students and teachers were to find and to practice intellectual freedom and growth. Lou LaBrant was unwavering in her faith that both teacher and student had the responsibility to learn and had the capacity to succeed.

LaBrant was well known for being independent and quick to seize initiative. Because she believed "individuals must be challenged to

achieve anything beyond mediocrity," she would challenge a profession to change just as she would challenge her own students. Though she certainly respected the individual, she would not let an individual's feelings stand in the way of her doing a job that needed to be done. She was an authority, and she was authoritative, once remarking that "an authority is someone who has an idea and speaks up for it."

LaBrant lacks neither ideas nor opinions, and she has frequently spoken up and spoken out. Her niece, Betty Fiehler, suggested that being opinionated "runs in the family. I don't argue with her; she would put me down in a minute! And when Lou does it, you know you have been put down" (1989). Given both vision and strong opinions, LaBrant consistently advocated interdisciplinary teaching, the importance to the world community of knowing foreign languages, allowing children free time after school rather than loading them with unnecessary homework, understanding the importance of ideas versus rote learning of information, and the importance of prior knowledge in reading.

Today, LaBrant expresses her failure to understand the current call for the "basics" in education. She explains that she "was taught the basics." Had it "not been for my parents' teaching at home," she would have remained "uneducated" (1987b). In her autobiography she stressed the support for and practice of literacy in her early home life. What the schools did to teach her the basics could have "ruined me for learning" she said, even allowing for the occasional exceptional teacher under whom she had studied—such as the Kansas high school English teacher who had trusted her to learn. "I wonder," she wrote, "whether those who talk about 'back to basics' have any real experience with what was taught ninety years ago . . . or whether they just have a vague idea that once upon a time education was in some ideal state" (1987b).

The fact that LaBrant did not become president of NCTE until rather late in her career is significant. She was opinionated and outspoken. Her niece described LaBrant "as never being interested in winning any personality contests" (Fiehler 1989). Intimates might speculate on several reasons for her becoming president while in her late sixties, but there is a quick, if implicit, consensus that LaBrant did not seek the job. It would not be hard to argue that the NCTE presidency *came to her* so late in her career because of her independence—and her characteristically frequent bluntness. Those unfailingly high standards for all with whom she worked must be kept in mind, but, in fairness, so should LaBrant's candor—and what was considered by some to be her "arrogance."

At her best, though, LaBrant did operate with directness and independence, and these were not qualities she developed late in life. In fact, she suggested that her reasons for being drawn to NCTE initially were not necessarily related to the quality of what she thought the Council was achieving in the late 1920s. Instead, her impatience with the trivialization of teaching English may have led to her membership. She described a "silly" presentation on teaching Shakespeare which she endured at her first NCTE conference in 1929 and quickly determined that thoughtful English teachers should be receiving better from their national organization, in addition to offering more thoughtful ideas to it. For the next sixty years, Lou LaBrant would become one of the most active, enlightened, and consistently professional voices in NCTE—even if her ideas were not always the easiest to accept nor among the most popular.

One of her very earliest *English Journal* articles may have reflected the impatience LaBrant felt at early NCTE conferences. In a piece she entitled "Masquerading," she wrote, "To be, for a moment, coherent: I am disturbed by such practices . . . as using the carving of little toy boats and castles . . . as the *teaching of English literature*." Though she would not deny the potential from some student interest in such activity, she did add, "But it makes a difference whether the interest be such as to lead to more *reading* or more *carving*." LaBrant never fired a shot at another's practices without offering an alternative: "The remedy would seem to be in changing the reading material rather than turning the literature course into a class in handicraft" (1931a, 245).

She argued that if Shakespeare were all that inaccessible to boys and girls, or if teachers could not make Shakespeare accessible, then alternative literature should be sought. Knowing LaBrant makes one wonder if she might not have preferred substitutes for the *teachers*, not for the literature. In any event, those teachers who were having their "Shakespeare" students build elaborate models of the Globe Theater could not have been comfortable.

One does not get the impression from her work that LaBrant was overly concerned with making teachers or students comfortable, however. There were always standards to be considered and a respect for individuals' ability to think. Her response to and brief involvement with the NCTE Curriculum Commission and its report, *An Experience Curriculum in English*, tells even more about her sometimes-controversial disposition. Though LaBrant's name is listed as a contributor to the 1935 *Experience Curriculum*, her contributions were not acceptable to the committee and her work was not included. "I did not fit the mold," she said, "and the mold was clear for teachers and for

contributors" (1989a). Such molds were not to her liking. She would not accept the *Experience Curriculum* because of its attempt to conceptualize English teaching, not because her work was unacceptable to its organizers.

In LaBrant's view the *Experience Curriculum* was too structured, with its complex listings of enabling objectives, strands of "experience," and increments of content. She felt that "too much had already been worked out for the teacher" (1989a) and that the experiences students would have were by and large experiences adults wanted them to have. She recognized the struggle to have this NCTE curriculum reflect John Dewey's views of the importance of a child's prior experience in learning. The *Experience Curriculum* organizers were, however, only espousing a progressive child-centeredness. What resulted was an approach to teaching English which necessitated a teacher's careful management, all in the name of students' "experiences." Consequently, LaBrant did not believe the *Experience Curriculum* "came close to accomplishing what it set out to accomplish, and claimed to have accomplished" (1989a).

Given her outspoken nature and strong independence, LaBrant was candid in her views of other Council publications and efforts as well. She was unabashed in saying she boxed her unread back issues of *English Journal* for a period of time and relegated them to her attic. When she felt the quality of thought "deteriorated," she simply "quit reading lest I would become somehow influenced by what others thought teachers ought to be doing" (1987b). Such views and outspokenness do not make for early or easy ascendancy to the NCTE presidency; they do, however, represent LaBrant's concern with being her own person and maintaining her own clear vision of how English ought to be taught.

LaBrant therefore developed a reputation as being somewhat of a maverick in NCTE, even as she was working with independent initiative in other aspects of her professional life. When a job needed to be done and could be done in a better way than tradition and bureaucracy would seemingly allow, LaBrant just took over and flailed away at red tape. Longtime friend Frank Jennings recounted one illustration: "In 1948 she called a dozen or so of her English Education students in and explained that, in New York, student teaching consisted of 90 hours in the classroom. She told the group that such an exercise would not do them any good, and that she had arranged for them to work in a junior high school on the lower East side. She told them they would work for a full academic year, 8:30-4:00, for twelve credits. They went, and she went as well as their supervisor, with no



university grant, support, or sanction. Saturday mornings were for seminars. The students got their credit, and an education" (1989).

Even as she made waves, stood up for what she believed, and issued her challenges to orthodoxy and inferior teaching methods and ideas, LaBrant did not need or seek the limelight. To be so unassuming and low in profile in some situations and yet so much on the cutting edge suggests the complex nature of her professional postures. She was, for example, the only NCTE president not to make a presidential address at the annual conference, deferring instead to J. N. Hook, who had just been named Executive Secretary in NCTE's reorganization. When she did speak or write, her popularity and candor ensured her an audience, though it is unlikely the audiences were without their detractors.

To hammer away so persistently and for so long against restrictive curricula, to be so impatient with teachers who would not seize initiative for their own teaching, and to be so adamant in setting such high moral and intellectual standards for students took great energy, commitment, and resolve. To implement free-reading reforms and personally meaningful writing for students; thoughtful, reflective teaching for preservice teachers; and publications with her brand of integrity in the Council took considerable initiative and time. The initiative was always there. Being blessed with her longevity has given her much time to grow in her own wisdom and in her opportunities to share what she knew.

Professional honesty was important to LaBrant, as were responsible uses of language throughout society. For LaBrant, how language was used and taught in classrooms, in professional life, and in our social lives was anything but a casual affair. She had a deep interest in languages generally and a passion for the English language and its study in particular. Her concerns with language were both academic and moral. As Frank Jennings said, "You had to be as honest as she was" (1989).

Many of her professional writings, including her dissertation, pertained to language development and use. Her respect for the value of language was also reflected in her dealings with students. She demanded honesty and clarity. She did not waste words, nor was there any doubt as to her meaning. According to Jennings, "She has the kind of honesty that makes some people uncomfortable" (1989). Max Bogart, another of LaBrant's students, recalls that same quality: "She was always so clear and precise. She expected her students to be precise as well. You couldn't fake with her; you had to be careful about what you said and how you said it. Every word was looked at. You had to be as honest as she was. Her comments were always very

thoughtful and appropriate. Through her teaching she helped me to gain insights into what language is all about" (1989).

LaBrant's unfailingly eloquent methods book (1951b) contains seven long, thoughtful chapters on English teaching, language instruction, and the English language. She commented once, "If teachers are to teach anything about a language to people *who already speak it*, they better know a great deal about what they are teaching and how to teach it" (1989a). The temptation to quote long and frequently from *We Teach English* is great. As James Squire indicated, "*We Teach English* is one of the best statements of pride in a profession that I have ever seen from anyone. It reminds us of the high calling of English more than any other document of that kind" (1989).

LaBrant began her methods book with some skepticism regarding the state of language instruction, but ended by issuing one of her many "high calls" to the profession: If shouting and superlatives had not dulled our thought and feeling, this book might begin with exclamations about the strange way with which educators in general, the public whom we have taught, and teachers of English themselves deal with the English language. Teaching a language spoken by a quarter of a billion people, a language using half a million word symbols, a language designed to deal with the minutiae of daily life and the affairs of the world, a language capable of describing the chemistry of a cell or our theories of the great Universe, a language not infrequently beamed to every country on the globe within a day, a language with potentialities for becoming the communication device for the world—teaching such a language, we have built courses around errors in usage and punctuation and the preservation of disappearing forms, and have argued the merits of a dozen minor pieces of writing as though *Ivanhoe* and *Silas Marner* were the mainstays of our culture. Faced with invasion and destruction, we have powdered our noses and arranged our skirts as sufficient devices for protection. Instead of lamenting our shortcomings, however, we may better spend our time in some examination of the instrument of the human mind, the English language, to the end that problems and materials and procedures may take place in a large scene (1951, 3–4).

And that she did, just as she had been doing for two decades previously and would continue to do for decades after. Lou LaBrant simply railed against textbook approaches to language study because of the insignificance of the textbooks' focus versus the significance of language in world and daily affairs. She wrote: "Language is a most important factor in general education because it is a vital, intimate way of behaving. It is not a textbook, a set of rules, or a list of books" (1940,

364). This was to become a theme she would repeat throughout her career.

During the war years and into the McCarthy era, LaBrant continued to speak passionately about the need for relevant, meaningful instruction in and about language. She said once that her "first request of every teacher of English is that he teach in his classroom the honest use of language and an *understanding of its relation to life*." She disavowed the primary importance of memorized language rules time and time again and offered that "making neat diagrams of sentences which pervert the truth is as wrong as *participating in sabotage or obstructing the common defense*—more wrong 'because language deals with the most precious concepts we have' (1941, 206; emphasis added).

This is strong language indeed, but it is born of two impulses. First, Lou LaBrant was frustrated throughout her career by what was passing as language instruction in schools, particularly in light of what she felt the youth of America needed to be learning about language in order to function in—and perhaps to maintain—the democracy into which they were born. Secondly, Lou LaBrant felt passionately about the sanctity and the power of language in daily life. Her speeches and her writing stressed how language shaped and governed our affairs, who we were, and who we would become.

The best and most concentrated evidences of LaBrant's interests in language came about through work with NCTE. In 1949 she chaired the NCTE Committee on the Role of English in Common Learnings, which was charged with answering this question: "What are the English (language arts) contributions to common learnings courses, and under what conditions are they best made?" Her committee proceeded from the assumption that "the use of one's native language is of great importance, and desirable use cannot be learned by mere drill, by good will, nor by accident." Teaching language well would require well-trained teachers responsible for "studying, guiding, and promoting" language growth. Such a responsibility "is not light," as the distorted use of language "by totalitarian countries has recently emphasized" (LaBrant et al. 1951, 7). The committee advocated "a broad understanding of the role of English; and that changes in language habits and attitudes and knowledges be handled as developments" (23).

In one sense, what LaBrant and her committee, and often LaBrant alone, advocated was not revolutionary. Of course language was important to democracy, to tolerable race relations, to human understanding. Of course language was fluid and dynamic. Of course language instruction could be reduced to banal linguistic trivia. But

few, if any, other educators of her day were as current with linguistic science, as firm in their understanding of semantics, as aware of a field of inquiry that would grow into semiotics, and as able to apply a growing body of research on language and language development. Only a few before or since her time have matched Lou LaBrant's success in translating a passion for language, a theoretical understanding of language, and research on language into methodologies that teachers could use. What she presented, discussed, and theorized about language in the first seven chapters of *We Teach English* was far ahead of its time in 1951. It remains well worth our time today.

There was a time in our profession's history when most of our outstanding English educators were generalists and able to divide their time and focus among the teaching of literature, the teaching of language, and the teaching of composition. LaBrant was such a generalist in the formative years of English education. More recently, however, many of our leading methodologists and researchers have specialized, devoting more time to a particular language art, or even specializing in a particular aspect of writing or reading instruction. LaBrant's semina and still current methods text, *We Teach English*, indicates that she was the truest and perhaps deepest generalist of her day. The range of her interests and the depth of experience and insight she has into language, and writing, and literature suggest that even today she would be a widely productive generalist in English education.

She was as devoted to the study and teaching of literature as she was to the importance of responsible language study in schools. Her unpublished autobiography details more of her early upbringing. The importance of being brought up in a family of readers was particularly clear. LaBrant wrote at length about her father's passion for literature. As a result, "we read together," she remembered, "and we talked about what we read. Knowing what wisdom was found in books of all kinds was important to my father, and what was most important to my father became most important to my family" (1987b). As one gets to know LaBrant, it is impossible not to be impressed with how her own reading has continued to range far and wide.

When we last visited LaBrant in the spring of 1989, her apartment was neatly strewn with contemporary literature, including books on politics, the arts, and the sciences. Recent issues of *English Journal*, no longer relegated to attic boxes, were by her reading chair. At that time LaBrant had been recommending *Perestroika* to her reading friends.

With LaBrant, it was always one book or another that everyone ought to have read or should be reading. James Squire recalled

LaBrant's excitement over *Dr. Zhivago* in the mid-sixties and her insistence that "all English teachers should just stop what they are doing and read that book for its wisdom about the world today and where we are going in international relations" (1989). LaBrant was only in her eighties at that time. Long before and since that time, LaBrant has been an avid reader of periodicals with a range too broad to detail. However, the fact that LaBrant has subscribed to the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* for years should suggest something of her reading breadth.

The kind of literary pedagogy which would proceed from such a reader, true to her own values and experiences, should not be hard to imagine. One would expect wide reading. One would expect minimum interference from a teacher. One would expect the values and perceptions of the readers being taught to be of significant issue. One would expect an advocacy for teachers themselves to read and to read broadly. By now, one would expect LaBrant to remember the best of what she learned from that one masterful high school teacher of English—and she does.

LaBrant's career is perhaps most clearly marked by her consistent interest in broadening the reading base of high school students. She saw reading lists as dangerous and believed that teachers who used them were either intellectually lazy or not very well read themselves, or both. She began a 1949 *English Journal* article by saying, "In the first place, it is easier to follow a prepared list than to think." She went on to argue that assuming someone else's list and basing a literary curriculum on it avoided responsibility, precluded personal fitting of reading to readers, and enabled external control of the curriculum (1949a, 38).

Her earliest experiences of trying to teach an inappropriate literary canon to poorly prepared, midwestern youth gave rise to her career-long interest in promoting free reading. Accordingly, one of her most extensive and influential research studies was entitled *An Evaluation of Free Reading in Grades Seven through Twelve, Inclusive*. Today's researchers might learn much from considering the goals of LaBrant's 1939 collaboration with her Ohio State colleague, Frieda M. Heller. The two sought to determine (1) to what extent had reading proved to be a factor in the student's life pattern; (2) to what extent had reading interests of students been extended; (3) to what extent did reading vary according to needs, abilities, and interests; and (4) to what extent was there evidence that the reading reflected standards that *students* (emphasis added) had developed (LaBrant and Heller 1939a, 2, 3).

LaBrant worked with several classes for three years. There was no outlined or predetermined course in English for these experimental

groups. The documentation, reporting, and analysis of what happened is as extensive as it is compelling to read. LaBrant wanted evidence for her convictions about the virtues of free reading. In seeking support for her convictions, she provided much information about what adolescents could and would do when freed from reading lists and able to select and read literature on their own. Space here will allow only the briefest report from the many conclusions.

LaBrant and Heller would argue that the present culture contains sufficient demand for reading to provide a powerful stimulation to adolescents who are freed from required reading; conversely, adolescents respond readily to the reading elements in their *own* culture pattern (78). What we have here is a paradox easily enough understood by those who would dig out this 1939 research. Some cynics would argue that generations of literature teachers have yet to understand fully or to apply what LaBrant and Heller were advocating.

As her own pedagogy was being transformed by research, LaBrant was therefore inclined to criticize NCTE's *Experience Curriculum* specifically for failing to include plans for teaching students to use the library and to select books they would enjoy (17, 295). LaBrant consequently called for new emphasis in literature study—first on contemporary reading available in and demanded by our culture, along with reading reflective of a youth's own culture. LaBrant and Heller found that for either emphasis to be translated into curricula, the adolescent reader must be, again, "freed to receive this stimulation" (1939a, 78).

Her interests in both how and why young people read involved her with a few other leaders of her day who, like LaBrant, were concerned with the art of reading texts in personally significant ways. LaBrant was a contemporary and colleague of Louise Rosenblatt's, who wrote *Literature as Exploration* and other progressive texts on the importance of reader response and subjective considerations in reading. Rosenblatt and LaBrant shared a belief in the value of the reader's response to literature. LaBrant's chapter in the NCTE-sponsored monograph *Reading in an Age of Mass Communication* provides a good explanation of why she believed understanding the experiences of the reader was so central to success in literature study. In this early piece focusing on reading processes, LaBrant recommended the following: an abundance of varied materials covering wide ranges of human endeavor, careful discussion of what actually happened in the readers' minds, an understanding of readers' "blind spots," and the readers' growing understanding of factors which make a writer's work more accessible. To justify her recommendations, she discussed personal factors which influence reading with very full and careful consideration of why



individual readers differ (1949b, 39). Social circumstance, previous experience, maturity level, and so on were among the perhaps obvious considerations. But for its time and given the sophisticated, experience-based manner in which LaBrant made her points, this was important reading for teachers of the early 1940s.

LaBrant believed that, "In considering the role of reading . . . we must never forget that the act of reading always concerns an individual and a piece of material" (56). This was a simple enough premise, to be sure. However, LaBrant believed teachers' lack of reading, their use of reading lists, and their inability to trust readers reading on their own combined to misdirect literature programs in schools. She had, after all, learned to read and learned to love to read at home, without a "teacher," and the best school teacher of literature she had "ever had or known about" really did not tell her much about what she had just read. Lou LaBrant had been trusted and enabled to read and to understand on her own, largely according to her own needs and interests and abilities. She wanted no less for readers of literature in schools.

Knowing Lou LaBrant has led us to the following suspicion: if people are truly lifelong learners, they become impatient with those who are not. LaBrant is certainly a lifelong learner. At this writing, her "current" interests as reported by friends include frequent correspondence (her letters are still "feisty"), her writing (a publication as late as spring of 1989), contemporary affairs (she was outspoken on the Iran-Contra affair and is not a great admirer of all our national leaders), and, of course, avid reading—Umberto Eco and semiotics, genealogy, and on and on.

Longtime NCTE leader James Squire expressed a good sense of how LaBrant's capacity to learn influenced her teaching. "She is continuously alive intellectually," says Squire, "in ways that many professors of English and literature have never been. She is interested in a wide variety of ideas and manages to relate them all to language" (1989). It is this broad range of interests across fields as well as within the various possible divisions of English and the language arts which enabled LaBrant to be the renaissance equivalent of an English educator of her age. Whether she discussed promising developments in science and technology or in social theory, LaBrant was more than superficially aware and had what approached a specialist's understanding of the theater as well as of atomic science; of linguistics as well as of architecture.

LaBrant is well traveled, well read, and inquisitive. Her memory remains very sharp late in her life, and she is fully aware of her own

intelligence, insight, and intellectual advantages. LaBrant was always a progressive reformer and always, it seemed, a step or two ahead of her time. Some thought she was out of step, if not out of line. But her knowledge of what was happening in the world of contemporary affairs and in diverse research fields made it impossible for her to abide orthodoxy in teaching—especially, as seemed to her so often the case, when the traditions flew in the face of new knowledge.

For example, in a seemingly standard article on vocabulary development and study, LaBrant's formulations were well grounded in her knowledge of contemporary research in language growth and development. Such clear and sound applications of research were rare in the *English Journal* of that day. By then, though, LaBrant's biting wit was not so rare. Readers of her work knew to expect such darts as the following, with which she concluded the vocabulary piece: "If the discussion preceding seems to offer no short cut to vocabulary growth, it is because there is no short cut" (1944, 480). Neither were there any shortcuts to a teacher's understanding as much about teaching as LaBrant understood.

To know as much, teachers would have had to read as much and read as well as LaBrant had read—and to be as perceptively aware as she was, as well. Teachers through seven decades have read LaBrant's NCTE publications, though they have not always read comfortably. LaBrant always provided an insightful, strongly opinionated, well-informed voice on the pages of *English Journal*. Teachers must have known that. Certainly LaBrant did.

Consider, for example, an article on new resources available to English teachers. LaBrant wrote, "Every age has had to remember the past, act in the present, and consider the future" (1953, 79). Keeping up with the present in order to act in it and preparing for the future compelled LaBrant to keep current. She advocated and demonstrated the virtues of understanding all that one could about child growth and development, about the role of language in world events, about emerging world literatures, about the mass media, and about the real-world lives of the boys and girls one encounters in classes. Lou LaBrant was not only able to do all of that and to reflect it in her own teaching and writing, she expected all teachers to follow suit. We must go back to the notion of standards. She did feel that *all* teachers really must read *Dr. Zhivago*. She reasoned that her reading of Pasternak's work had moved and informed and humanized her. Believing that all teachers should be as fully informed and as fully humanized as possible, LaBrant naturally wanted teachers to read not only *as* she read, but sometimes *what* she read.

In one of her most vital, impassioned, and widely discussed NCTE addresses, LaBrant outlined a view of curriculum which emerges when teachers continue to learn. Her 1952 NCTE presentation in Cincinnati was entitled "New Bottles for New Wine." LaBrant's eloquence, global perspective, passion for language, and sense of urgency are captured in these lines with which she concluded a long and sound appeal for curriculum progress and reform:

Twenty centuries ago a teacher whose words were to change the history of the world spoke in a parable: "And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish." It is time to examine the patched and worn bottles into which we have put this magnificent, live wine of language. If our pupils miss its glory, if they use it carelessly as a form, a manner of dress; if they cease to guard it as a means for honest exploration of truth, the tragedy of atomic warfare may be slight. (347)

The view of a fluid curriculum in a dynamic world increasingly informed by research and new knowledge is clear in the preface to *We Teach English*. "The book which follows," LaBrant began, "is an attempt to point out aspects of philosophy, psychology, and scholarship in the field of language which I found relevant to the program in English, and to indicate some of the implications." The tentative nature of her own formulations is clearly acknowledged, and therein readers must sense the need for a curriculum which evolves: "Obviously, such a statement [of practice] must be imperfect and tentative, since no one is master of the rich research available, new information appears daily, and our language and its uses change as society changes" (1951, 7). Having said once again what she had been saying and practicing for fifty years, LaBrant challenged all who teach English: "For many of us, fundamental revision of attitude is required if we are to accept what modern scholarship has discovered" (7). The only points of pedagogy upon which Lou LaBrant seemed disinclined to change her position were those which mindlessly maintained outworn practices.

Finally, it was LaBrant's understanding of teaching, of teachers' lives, and of boys and girls in English classrooms which combined to unify what she knew, what she shared, and what she ultimately represented to generations of teachers. LaBrant clearly understood teaching. Her talks, her courses, her writing illustrated that understanding. But James Squire recalled that in offering her consistently useful advice and focus, "Lou LaBrant reminded us always of the high calling of English teaching" (1989).

"High calling" or not, teaching as LaBrant performed it was not for *prima donnas*. While she did describe teaching as "one of life's great experiences," she worked hard and was frequently involved in duties which many would consider outside the realm of a teacher's responsibilities. She served punch at a school "housewarming," provided daily janitorial services for a small country school, supervised prefreshman summer students at Dillard University late into the night (doing so one summer with a broken ankle), and spent her Saturdays conducting seminars with student teachers.

Though LaBrant was willing to pitch in and do more than her part, she refused to allow anyone to take advantage of her. She recalled a small country schoolhouse in which she taught in the early 1900s. Her duties included arriving early each morning in order to have the building warmed by the time her students came. After a day's teaching, she would remain to clean floors, desks, and chalkboard and to prepare the fire for the next morning. On the day of a farmers' meeting to be held in her school (the first since her arrival in the community), she meticulously cleaned the schoolhouse and left the key under the mat so that the men could let themselves in for their meeting. When she entered the room the following morning, she found it in complete disarray. Once she and the children had cleaned up after the farmers, she announced to her students that there would no longer be a rule against spitting on the floor. "Obviously," she proclaimed, "your fathers see nothing offensive in the habit!" From then on, the farmers left the schoolroom as tidy as they found it. LaBrant had demonstrated that being a teacher did not make her a "doormat" (1987a, 21). Teaching, then, was many things for Lou LaBrant—whether it was necessary custodial work, social activity, or extra hours and weekends of investment in the academic futures of students unaccustomed to such concern by a professor.

Even more importantly, LaBrant understood teaching well enough to know that to teach meant to change. The fact that the world was changing and that teachers must change with it was an important theme in her writing. LaBrant believed that given new knowledge and new experience in a new world, teachers must change both how they taught and what they thought. Such beliefs are characteristic of curriculum reformers, and Lou LaBrant was a curriculum reformer.

Her trust in individuals and her instincts about teachers and teaching helped her to realize two important facts about the generations of English teachers she tried to inform and to inspire. First, she realized that thoughtful teachers needed as much of her own back-

ground, conviction, and courage to change as she was able to instill in them. Secondly, Lou LaBrant realized the importance of forever encouraging teachers to their highest potentials while challenging them with the honor and responsibility of being a teacher of English.

Much that she felt about teaching high school boys and girls would be paralleled in her teaching of teachers. For example, she wrote, "I do not happen to adhere to the theory that students should look upon me as one of the class." She acknowledged that as the teacher she had read more, thought more, and lived more than her students. At the same time, however, she encouraged teachers to "respect the judgments they [the students] make in terms of what they have had time to discover" (1953, 84).

Lou LaBrant devoted her life to helping students—and their teachers—discover more about their world, their language, and their own potential as readers and writers. Tough as she was, her impatience with the profession and with teachers she found most difficult to reach was tempered by her awareness of teachers' knowledge in light of her own. As she taught teachers at conferences, in her classes, and through her publications, LaBrant talked and wrote as if she did, indeed, respect *their* judgments "in terms of what they have had time to discover."

Few people have read as much about teaching and learning and children. Fewer still have Lou LaBrant's range of experience. She was unique in her capacity to apply thoughtfully and then to express to others what she had learned from her own teaching and reading. But it was in her continuous attempts to challenge teachers and to instill in them a sense of professionalism that LaBrant achieved her greatest eloquence. Nothing she wrote better expressed how she saw English teaching than the short, concluding chapter of *We Teach English*:

No one can teach English with completeness. It requires more knowledge, wisdom, and sympathy than any one man or woman can possess. It requires more reading, more writing, more study than the hours of the day allow. It results, as does all teaching, in defeats, in regrets, and in disappointments. But it results also in achievement, and adds to the very knowledge, wisdom, and sympathy it requires. It deals with the intimate matters of the mind, and so terrifies the thoughtful and sensitive teacher. There are a thousand reasons why you should not begin to teach English, and if you have begun, why you should leave for other fields; there are a thousand reasons, but there are a thousand and one why you should begin and why those of us who have begun would not stop—why, despite all that we know, we could not leave. *We Teach English*. (1951, 312)

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