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 September 2009
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**What Does “Tenure” Do?:
 The 2006 MLA Task Report and the Case of Alvin Kernan**

Tenure Matters

This paper began as an effort to fill a void one influential commentator spotted in the widely noticed 2006 report of the **Modern Language Association Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion**. Shortly after it appeared, Catherine R. Stimpson – Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at NYU, and former Director of the McArthur Foundation Fellows program – remarked that what she found missing in an otherwise rich and important document was “a passionate yet logical definition and defense of tenure that I might use for several audiences – the tuition-paying students who quickly turn to instant messaging in a class taught by a member of the Dead Wood Society, the trustees who wonder why academics should have job security when almost no one else does.” Stimpson herself did not attempt to fill the void, nor name names of other audiences she believes need persuading. But she did go on to say provocatively that “if tenure matters – and an implicit conviction of the MLA task force is that it does – then that defense must emanate from all of us who believe in it.”¹

The resulting essay is not a “passionate yet logical definition and defense of tenure,” so much as an historian’s effort to explore several issues I believe would have to be addressed in fashioning such a statement.² I number myself among those who believe that tenure matters. But for reasons this essay should make clear I find it difficult to identify myself as ‘passionate’ in this belief. Part of my quandary is that when I look at “tenure” what I see is not one thing, but several things. Or more precisely, what I see is a complex academic *practice*, rather than a single concept. And when I look closely at the many elements that define the practice, it is by no means obvious they all fit together logically, let alone that each deserves a passionate defense.

Consider two puzzles about tenure. The first appears in examining its most familiar definition and defense. Faculty members awarded tenure, its proponents typically say, are given job security so they will have the freedom to follow their curiosity wherever it may lead, and however long it may take. The ability to test one’s ideas without fear of intrusion or retaliation, according to this view, also serves the public good, if we assume the public good to encompass the encouragement of disinterested inquiry and the advancement of objective knowledge.

If only things were so simple. Any freshly minted Ph.D. looking for a starting full-time faculty appointment would be quick to tell you that the beating heart of the modern American practice of tenure lies in the

¹ The full text of the 2006 **MLA Report** can be found at http://www.mla.org/tenure_promotion ; Catherine R. Stimpson, “Dean’s View of the MLA Report,” <http://insidehighered.com/2007/02/06/stimpson>.

² “Definitions and defenses” of tenure are not in scarce supply. Among the more frequently cited are Fritz Machlup, “In Defense of Academic Tenure,” *AAUP Bulletin* 50 (Summer, 1964), 112-24, and William Van Alstyne “Tenure: A Summary, Explanation, and Defense,” *AAUP Bulletin* 57 (Autumn, 1971), 329. Both are reprinted in *The Case for Tenure*, ed. Matthew W. Finkin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

elaborate and time-consuming procedures colleges and universities choose to observe in awarding permanent faculty appointments, and that these procedures turn on a different, perhaps even an opposite, set of assumptions. Continuous faculty appointments are awarded only to those who manage to win increasingly scarce jobs designated “tenure-track” and then succeed in meeting announced professional standards in teaching and research. Success also must be demonstrated fairly quickly, usually in 6-7 years. And almost everywhere the decision rule is “up-or-out.” Job security is conditional on promotion, in other words, usually from assistant to associate professor, with the decision to promote based largely on evaluations provided by courts of review composed of already tenured faculty.³ Whatever benefits the award of continuous appointment may bring to individual professors or to the public at large, American colleges and universities certainly do not bestow them on faculty who begin their careers intent on taking their time and speaking their minds regardless of consequences.⁴

Now consider a different puzzle posed by the 2006 **MLA Task Force Report**. In 2004, the MLA’s Executive Council created a task force to examine current standards and emerging trends in publication requirements for tenure and promotion in English and foreign literature and language departments in the United States. The Executive Council acted in response to then widespread unease in the academic profession about ever-rising demands for research productivity, as well as to more specific anxiety within MLA disciplines that forms of scholarship other than the monograph (a single-authored scholarly book) were not being properly recognized. Fearing that junior scholars today are no longer being tenured in ways – and at rates – similar to their predecessors, the Executive Council charged the task force with uncovering the factual foundations of such concerns during the academic years from 1994-95 to 2003-4 and making recommendations to address the changing environment in which scholarship now figures in tenure decisions.

The information gathered by the 2006 **MLA Report** makes for a complex and mostly troubling picture. For those who already believe in the value of tenure as currently practiced, there is some good news. While demands placed on candidates for tenure – especially demands for publication – in fact have been expanding in kind and

³ There is some hard information on what currently counts as a standard tenure review process. In a recent survey of 1,380 U.S. four year institutions, stratified by Carnegie classification, Cathy Trower has closely examined faculty employment practices at 217 colleges and universities, in a sampling that closely matches the overall population by Carnegie classification and institutional control. Trower compares individual institutional policy statements to the “Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure” issued by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1995, and concludes that the AAUP’s recommended regulations are now widely recognized as the definitive compendium of standard tenure practice. As a general rule, all tenure-granting institutions – less 10% of those Trower examined do not offer tenure – have specified probationary periods for junior faculty; define “tenure” as permanent employment; offer promotion in rank; and allow dismissal of tenured faculty for “adequate cause” and financial exigency. Most tenure-granting institutions also have a maximum probationary period of seven years, and link academic freedom and tenure in their policy statements. See Cathy A. Trower, “What is Current Policy?,” in *The Questions of Tenure*, ed. Richard P. Chait (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 32-68. Apparently because the 1995 AAUP recommendations say nothing about how institutions ought to weigh the “standard” three variables of teaching, research, and service in making tenure decisions, Trower does not address the question of standard criteria for tenure.

⁴ It may be true that academic freedom and “tenure” – understood simply as a continuous faculty appointment – are inseparable, in the perhaps obvious sense that you cannot be free to teach and to write as you please if you are afraid of losing your job. The catch here is that not everyone is entitled to a continuous appointment. You cannot be assured of your job, in other words, until you actually have “tenure”.

quality since the mid-1990s, there has been no perceptible lowering of tenure rates among those who make it to the final stage of the tenure review process. Indeed, nationwide the success rate in MLA disciplines hovers around 90% – a figure that may strike some as remarkably high.

But then come two pieces of countervailing bad news. The first is a reminder that the professional academic workplace has been a buyer's market for almost four decades now, and that the number of qualified candidates seeking tenure-track positions still far outnumbers the available positions. Over the last ten years, fewer than 40% of PhD recipients in the applicant pool for tenure-track positions in MLA disciplines have obtained such positions and gone through the tenure review process at the institutions where they were originally hired. A somewhat larger number of doctoral recipients in MLA disciplines – more than 40% – never obtained tenure-track appointments. If one factors faculty hired to tenure-track positions who leave before they come up for tenure decisions – the number runs well over 20% – it turns out that between 1994-1995 and 2003-2004 PhDs in fields represented by the MLA had only about a 35% chance of earning permanent faculty appointments.

The news gets worse. Not only does the professional academic workplace remain a tight buyer's market, institutional buyers increasingly shop for academic labor without continuous appointments in mind. The 2006 **MLA Report** echoes the views others who have been telling us that the single greatest change in faculty hiring practices in recent decades has been a dramatic increase in the employment of part-time and full-time non-tenure track (NTT) faculty. As the number of students has continued to grow, and tenure-track jobs have continued to decline relative to all faculty appointments, both part-time and full-time NTT faculty appointments have increased substantially. In the 1970s, only 22% of faculty nationwide consisted of part-time employees; by the early 1990s, part-time employees constituted 40% of the faculty. “The casualization of the academic workforce,” as some call it, has only increased in recent years. By the end of the 1990s, in all types of institutions, three out of four new faculty members were appointed to non-tenure-track position. Between 2001 and 2003, the number of part-time faculty jobs in degree-granting institutions increased from 44% to 46%, and almost certainly will reach or surpass 50% by the end of the decade.

What should we make of the relative decline in the ranks of tenured faculty? The authors of the 2006 **MLA Report** agree with those who say it signals the erosion of tenure *per se*. But they do not provide a particularly convincing explanation of why this might be the case. Indeed, the only worry the reports voices at any length concerns increased demands and pressure on full-time tenure-track and tenured faculty in “many areas for which the casualized work force is not – and should not be – responsible: service on department committees and in departmental governance; student advising; teaching upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses; directing dissertations” (15) and building intellectual community inside and outside of individual departments. Maybe so. But if the recent increase in the number of part-time and full-time NTT faculty is cause for real alarm, surely what makes it so is not the prospect of longer hours for faculty fortunate enough to hold tenured or tenure-track appointments. Rather, if tenure occupies shaky ground, the obvious reason, one would think, must be that those who control resources needed to make tenured and tenure track appointments no longer view them as the only viable models for employing for professional academics.

It should be said, too, that if this gloomy reading of the future of tenure is right, the void in the 2006 **MLA Report** is deeper than Catherine Stimpson has spotted. The report's implicit conviction may be that tenure matters. Its implicit conclusion, however, is that tenure is likely to matter less and less in decades to come. So it appears that what we believers in tenure need at the moment is not just a "definition and defense" of tenure that will speak to skeptics and critics. We need one that will also speak to the current generation of PhDs, all of whom are likely to view a permanent faculty appointment as the ultimate prize, but the majority of whom seem destined to join the swelling ranks of a 'casualized' academic labor force.

What Does "Tenure" Do?

Against this background, it is tempting to argue that the very word tenure has become unmanageably ambiguous, and so should either somehow be re-invented or simply be abandoned.⁵ Is "tenure" meant primarily to protect scholars with controversial views or to screen out scholars with mediocre skills? How do we know the difference between the two? Who ultimately has the authority to decide, and on what grounds? If tenure is so integral to the academic profession, why are tenure-track faculty appointments in increasingly scarce supply? And if tenure-track appointments are in relative decline, why is the success rate so remarkably high when it comes to making permanent faculty appointments? These days, "tenure" seems more a site of questions than of answers, so many-sided and uncertain, one wonders if there is any point in thinking of it as an intelligible, organized whole.

But there is a way to sort things out. The challenge of understanding "tenure," I would argue, is not that it has no definite meaning, but that over time the word has been employed and re-made to serve a number of distinctive purposes, some of which are continuous, some not. Or put another way, like other concepts or ideas that have gained great cultural authority, the meaning of "tenure" has not been static. That of course is one of the reasons why the word has come to matter so much. It also suggests, I think, that if the big question "What is tenure?" has no quick, easy answers, we can begin to address it by focusing on a question of a different order, and one that can be answered directly: "What does the word tenure do?" Or, more precisely, "What has the word tenure been used to do over time?"

How a focused inquiry into the history of tenure can open up the broader question of what tenure is should become clear in the course of this essay. At this point, I just want to pose it, yet in posing also say that – at the moment – I have no idea whether or not drawing attention to the fact that "tenure" has a history will lend it new legitimacy or help defenders and critics of tenure reconcile their differences. The lessons of history are rarely simple. But I also take it that one of the main functions of rigorous historical investigation is to resist the commonplaces of the day wherever they come from. So my purpose here is not to take sides. I do what historians often do: tell a story that should help to explain the way things are.

⁵ It is worth noting that "tenure" comes from the Latin *tenere*, a word meaning "to hold or have possession of." So it perhaps unavoidably suggests that the meaning of tenure lies entirely in the privileges and protections that come with a continuous appointment. If you see tenure as a living practice, however, there is no question that its beating heart lies in the procedures that academic institutions follow in identifying those worthy of the privileges and protections of tenure. One need only look at almost any contemporary college or university faculty handbook for evidence of this point. The connection between tenure and academic freedom is usually explained in a paragraph or two; descriptions of the tenure review process

My story is a selective and critical re-telling of Alvin Kernan's sometimes comic, sometimes disconcerting account of his experience in getting tenure in the English department at Yale in the 1950s and 1960s. I have seized on Kernan's tenure tale – recounted in considerable detail in his professorial memoir *In Plato's Cave* (1999) – for two reasons. First, because it retraces the first phase of a modern professional academic career that turned out to be as triumphant as any scholar could hope for, Kernan's story is interesting on its own terms.⁶ More important for my purposes, his tenure tale also is interesting for what it reveals about several issues I believe must be addressed in any adequate effort to understand the distinctive things “tenure” does, and how those things have changed and multiplied over the last fifty years. After I have finished coaxing Kernan's memoir to shed light on these matters, I'll conclude with what I take to be an historian's definition of tenure, and some thoughts on what should come from efforts to investigate tenure's past with rigorous care and accuracy.

In Search of ‘the Golden Fleece’: Alvin Kernan at Yale, 1954-65

We first catch sight of Alvin Kernan getting on the road to tenure in March, 1953, in Troy, New York, where he was nearing the end of a one-year appointment as an instructor teaching required introductory English to engineering students at Rennselaer Polytechnic Institute. The journey began when he received an apparently unexpected letter from the chairman of Yale's English department, F.W. Hilles, offering him a renewable one-year appointment as an instructor, on three conditions. The first was accepting a salary \$300 less than what he was earning at R.P.I at the time. The others were finishing his still-in-progress Yale doctoral dissertation – a study of the satirical English poet and playwright John Marston (1575-1634?) – and having his doctorate conferred at the University's upcoming June commencement ceremony. None proved to be a problem. Three months later, then, on what Kernan remembers as a bright and sunny day when Yale was still in “all its Gothic glory,” he walked onto the platform on the Old Campus to get his diploma, looked down at his wife and two young children, and felt he had been “admitted to the company of the learned” (82).

The ebullient mood proved short-lived. Kernan also remembers he was one of a then “unheard-of number” (85) of ten new English instructors Yale hired in the fall of 1953. So he arrived with no expectation of winning a permanent appointment. But tenure turned out to be a “golden fleece” that “glittered so brightly” he found it “impossible to resist trying for it” (130). Kernan recalls, too, that he arrived knowing the rules for trying included the now familiar “up-or-out” and “publish-or-perish.” Or more precisely, in 1954, junior faculty appointments at Yale had ten years to prove themselves: four as instructors on renewable yearly appointments, followed by two renewable three-year terms as assistant professors. They also knew that simply teaching well over the course of ten years would not suffice. At Yale, the award of tenure was conditional on promotion to associate professor with tenure, and promotion also required one acclaimed scholarly book as well as several articles published in leading

typically take up several pages.

⁶ Alvin Kernan, *In Plato's Cave* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). At the time Kernan published his memoir, he was Senior Advisor in the Humanities at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. His long academic career included chaired faculty positions at Yale and Princeton, also appointments as Associate Provost at Yale and Dean of the Graduate School at Princeton. Kernan began his career as a student of English satire and then branched out in various directions to publish widely acclaimed studies of Shakespeare and Samuel Johnson and the rise of print technology.

refereed journals.

Kernan's professional life during its first ten years was all teaching and writing, and he worked at both ferociously hard. In the 1950s, the standard school week at Yale and elsewhere continued through Saturdays, with instructors assigned to teach individual sections of 8:00 AM classes. Some upper-level courses were team-taught, and designed by senior faculty to serve in part as testing grounds for untenured faculty. In Kernan's case, one assignment included teaching discussion sections of Literature I – "a pure masterworks" of Western literature course – that put him under the intimidating gaze of the Alexander Pope and Shakespeare scholar Maynard Mack, who at the time was the most formidable figure in the department. Besides teaching discussion sections, Kernan had to take his turn delivering the Literature I's weekly lecture. Mack was in the audience, as Kernan vividly remembers him, "conspicuously and busily writing in his large notebook. So long as he wrote, you were OK, but when he looked up, paused, and then closed the notebook, you had ceased to interest him, and since he was the most powerful professor in the humanities, it meant your Yale career was probably over" (103).

Despite his heavy teaching load, Kernan found ample time to write, and he was quick off the mark in making a name for himself as productive and well-respected scholar of Elizabethan drama and literature. Yale University Press gave him a contract to produce a new edition of *Julius Caesar* for the Yale Shakespeare Series. Signet Books, preparing to launch its own more widely used collection of single-volume Shakespeare plays, commissioned him to edit *Othello*. More importantly, Yale University Press also published his first scholarly monograph *The Cankered Muse: Satire in the English Renaissance* (1959), a study of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English satire that grew out of his doctoral dissertation. Published simultaneously in London by Oxford University Press, the book received widespread scholarly recognition, including a full center-page review in the *Times Literary Supplement* that identified Kernan as a rising star in his field, praising him at length for developing an interpretation of the period that "if it is accepted" would stand as a "contribution towards a wider interpretation" of the dynamics of satire.⁷ Forty years ago, it was exactly the career-launching review every first-time academic author in Anglo-American literary studies dreamed of. The *TLS* review also made Kernan's name among his faculty colleagues at Yale, helping to open the door to the then elite inner circle of faculty fellowships at one the University's residential colleges.

But Kernan also had money worries on the road to tenure, and they remained a constant during these years, partly because university faculty everywhere were scandalously underpaid in the 1950s, partly because his family would expand to four children by the time he came up for tenure. To make ends meet, Kernan taught during the summers. He also took on a variety of other extra jobs both during the school year and the summers, including work at the Yale Shakespeare Institute in nearby Stratford, Connecticut, where he "read applications, arranged rooms for the students, deposited checks, attended lectures, and taught anything that needed teaching" (95). Kernan also produced for a then booming (and lucrative) post-World War II market in college textbooks. In 1963, he published *Character and Conflict*, a selection of great plays from the Greeks to the present, which was

⁷ "The Savage Eye," *TLS*, July 8, 1960, p. 432.

accompanied by essays of his own on various aspects of theater. In 1965, edited and wrote a general introduction for *Classics of Modern Theater*, a collection of modern drama from Ibsen to Brecht and Ionesco. Both textbooks sold well over one hundred thousand copies. His Signet edition of *Othello* enjoyed even more success, selling over a million copies and is still in print.

By any reasonable standard, it all made for a challenging and eventful life, and one that Kernan pursued with seemingly unlimited energy. Yet his memories of these years are rarely filtered by nostalgia. According to Kernan, “competition for the tenure appointments everywhere was Darwinian” (123). His anecdotal account of the actual competition at Yale, however, tells more of folly and irresponsible behavior, than of the academic equivalent of natural selection (whatever that might be). One example will suffice. At the time, support for tenure from the senior professor in one’s field was considered crucial for tenure at Yale. Kernan’s was Charles Prouty, then a well-known Shakespeare scholar, also former director of his dissertation. But Kernan remembers Prouty mostly for his “whining rhetoric” and as “a kind of negative role model.” Indeed, he tells us that throughout his academic life he frequently “corrected his own behavior in class or meeting by thinking, ‘You sound like Prouty,’ or ‘That’s something Prouty would do’” (123). Reading Kernan’s memories of his first ten years at Yale, one never senses he thought he shared a life with colleagues who believed they were pursuing an important mission, let alone one where they understood they were all in it together and prepared to help one another.⁸

It is hardly a surprise, then, that when Kernan gets to the details of his own tenure decision, neither the process that guided it, nor its outcome, earn anything resembling a definition or defense. Part of the problem here, it appears, is that Kernan was chasing a moving target. He tells us that when he came up for tenure on schedule in 1964 – apparently to his complete surprise – the bar had been raised: tenure in Yale’s English department was now a two scholarly book affair. Although Kernan had only one, he was not immediately bounced out. The department instead promoted him (and a few unnamed others) to what he remembers as a new kind of position: associate professor without tenure, an appointment intended essentially to keep him in place while a final judgment was delayed for a year. Kernan also recalls that, in explaining the department’s vote, then department chair Louis Martz at first offered him considerable reassurance, saying: “It is absolutely the strongest vote of confidence the department could possibly give you. We will take up your tenure next year, but for the moment we want you to know how positively we feel about you and your work.” But after continuing cheerfully along this line for some time – “it is everything but tenure” – Martz realized he was promising the disappointed Kernan more than he could deliver, then paused, and concluded the conversation coolly with a brief and disclaimer: “Of course, it doesn’t *commit* the department in *any* way.” (134).

Moved up, but neither in nor out, Kernan began his eleventh year on the Yale faculty as a “frozen” associate professor confronting what seemed to be the darkest hour of his career. But his crisis of confidence

⁸ Another way of putting this might be to say that the first truth Kernan learned about the modern American practice of tenure is that it requires tenure-track faculty to co-exist with already tenured faculty; the second is that they can only co-exist for so long. Such co-existence is unavoidably and predictably uncomfortable, and in a variety of ways. Chief among them for tenure-track faculty is being haunted by the fear that their tenured colleagues will not invite them to stay.

proved short-lived. Kernan's initial response, he tells us, was to spend months of nights and weekends in his office in what from the start seemed a hopeless effort to produce a second scholarly book. Then it dawned on him that a second scholarly book did not necessarily mean a second original monograph. Satire had remained Kernan's primary interest as a scholar in the early 1960s, and since the appearance of his first book he had published several new scholarly articles that had their origins in his teaching an undergraduate course on the subject. On re-reading those pieces, Kernan concluded they shared a common theme, and so he re-worked them, added some new essays, and gave the collection the title *The Plot of Satire*. Although Yale University Press had not yet accepted the manuscript of his second book when his delayed tenure review began, Kernan was allowed to submit it for consideration, along with some other uncollected published articles and the plays he had edited. Then the long wait for a final decision began.

The wait was long because the process for making a tenure decision at Yale in 1964-65 was complex and time-consuming. Kernan does not hide the incredulity with which he obviously still views that process. But it does not prevent him from giving us this detailed account of what took place:

... the system for promotion was at best a very tricky affair in which things could go wrong at almost any point, and difficulties could appear from unexpected directions. The standard procedure was for full professors in a department, after reading all the candidate's writings, to meet in solemn conclave, discuss the candidate, and vote. In those days the English professors sat in a horseshoe shape room at the top of the graduate school, and the chairman, sitting at the open end, called on each professor in turn to give an opinion of the candidate. After everyone had heard everyone else's views, the vote proceeded aloud, in the same order. If it was negative, the chairman called the poor fellow that evening and tried to find soothing things to say. If positive, the recommendation was forwarded to the Humanities Committee, made up of professors from various humanities departments and chaired by the director of the division. The committee members then read what they could of the candidate's works, interviewed the chairman of the recommending department, and voted whether to send the name on to the Board of Permanent Officers, chaired in alternate years by the graduate and undergraduate deans, and composed of full professors in the faculty of arts and sciences. If no one in that august body decided to make some kind of an issue about academic matters having nothing to do with the candidate, or if no one had a long-smoldering personal grudge, or if the appointment did not involve some ongoing battle between "big-enders" and "little-enders," or if no one just felt like being difficult that day, the nomination would stagger forward to the provost. The provost would present it to the academic committee of the trustees, who would solemnly vote that so-and-so be given a permanent associate or full professorship, and the university secretary would duly notify the teacher of the decision of heavy vellum in an elaborate script. Tenure was, as was often said, "a carefully guarded privilege," but it is a wonder anyone made it through this length, ramshackle process (132-33).

This long passage is worth excerpting verbatim for reasons I'll discuss in some detail in the section that follows. But two points can be made quickly to preview that discussion. The first is simply that there is nothing quite like this ordeal in any of the now steadily growing number of memoirs written by other academics of Kernan's generation.⁹ None of them, it seems, had to undergo such a protracted review process. The second point is that, if

⁹ A mini-boom of academic memoirs has been underway for almost two decades now. To date, most have been written by figures who, like Kernan, launched their careers in the late 1940s and 1950s. See, e.g., H. Stuart Hughes, *Gentleman Rebel* (New York: Ticknor and Field, 1990); William H. Pritchard, *English Papers: A Teaching Life* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1995); Paul Fussell, *Doing Battle: The Making of a Sceptic* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1996), chs. vi-ix; Richard Pipes, *VIXI: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven: Yale University Press); John Morton Blum, *A Life with History*

we strip this long passage of its irreverent tone, it will give us a fairly accurate account of Yale's complicated tenure review process in the mid-1960s. That process in fact "a very tricky affair," but, as we shall see, it was 'tricky' by design.

Today the standard phrase for Kernan's time as an untenured faculty member is "probationary period." And when the story he tells about these anxious, hyperactive years comes to an end, it concludes neither with a sigh of relief, nor with Kernan's proud proclamation that his most obvious virtues – a relentless work ethic combined with great intelligence and imagination – ultimately made for success.

What Kernan remembers is that five equally worthy candidates were competing for four tenured positions available the Yale English department in 1964- 65. The first went to Harold Bloom – appointed instructor the year after Kernan arrived – who used an offer of a professorship from another university to obtain a permanent appointment, and thereby was spared the long procedural wait that Kernan and three other colleagues– Thomas Greene, Richard Sylvester, and Harry Burger – had to endure. The remaining three tenured positions had to be divided among these four, all of whom the English department wanted to promote, and yet all whom – like Kernan – also happened to be Renaissance literary scholars. Final authority in the matter rested in the hands of Yale's provost, Kernan tells us, and he perhaps understandably ruled it was not in Yale's interest to promote all four. Remaining adamant in the face of persistent departmental lobbying, Kernan tells, it was the Provost who ultimately forced the English department to make a decision to let Berger go.

Then the story of Kernan's eleven-year march to tenure stumbles to an abrupt end. Looking back on the moment when he finally has the "golden fleece" in hand, this is all Kernan can muster in the way of an explanatory overview:

It would be comforting to think we struggled and suffered in some great war for truth and knowledge, but I suspect that some of us were merely lucky, some unlucky. The frankest of the Yale English professors, the old cynic Talbot Donaldson, told me they promoted me because they thought I would make a good chairman, though as it turned out I never held the job (136).

Kernan obviously wants to leave us with the sense that for him tenure at Yale was not the end of the rainbow. But more actually awaited him at the end of the road to tenure than he chooses to let on here. It is true that Kernan was never elected chair of Yale's English Department. We learn a bit later in his memoir, however, that he was appointed Yale's associate provost not long after he was awarded a permanent faculty appointment. He would hold that position until the Fall of 1969, then leave for Yale four years later to become Dean of the Graduate School at Princeton.

(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Forrest MacDonald, *Recovering the Past* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007); W. B. Carnochan, *Momentary Bliss: An American Memoir* (Stanford University Libraries, 1999). If mentioned at all, tenure decisions in these memoirs are mentioned only in passing. Typically, they are recalled in very brief anecdotal accounts of deans or department chairs making tenured offers or announcing tenure decisions in private office meetings or by way of telephone calls. Kernan's tenure tale, by contrast, occupies 51 of the 300 pages of the text of *In Plato's Cave*.

Five Ways of Looking at What “Tenure” Does

Kernan was awarded tenure forty-five years ago. I have said already his story helps us understand several issues that have to be addressed in answering the questions “What does the word tenure do?” and “What has the word been used to do over time?” The help his story provides, however, turns out to be a bit complicated, mostly because it requires a close look at problems with what Kernan happens to recall about what happened to him on the road to tenure. Because Kernan’s tenure tale is long and rich with characters and incidents, on first reading it seems both disillusioned and informative. It does not take much digging in Yale’s history, however, to discover he is not quite as savvy as he seems.¹⁰ For example, he leaves the impression that Yale’s tenure standards were changed on him more-or-less at the last minute. Yet we know that during the late 1950s, in an effort to upgrade the faculty, Yale’s administration decided that appointments to tenured positions now would occur only if departments warranted that a promotion to full professor would soon be in the offing and justified the claim with evidence of a promising record of publications. The established rule in Yale’s English department when Kernan first came up for tenure, then, was not “*publish -or- perish*,” but more exactly: “*publish one scholarly book (and have another on the way) -or- perish*.” And this new rule was designed specifically to prevent the “tenuring up” of Yale’s faculty with competent but run-of-the-mill assistant professors. It seems clear the English department did not think Kernan fell in that category, and doubtless he felt the same. One can only wonder why, in looking back, he cannot bring himself to acknowledge that in providing him an extra year to finish a second book the department not only gave him a justifiable vote of confidence, it thereby also did itself a favor.

This section will touch on several other instances where Kernan has failed to count his blessings. My aim here, however, is not to take him to task for lacking twenty-twenty hindsight. For my purposes, the chief virtue of his tenure tale is that it invites us to focus squarely on what I earlier called the beating heart of the modern American practice of tenure: the procedures and standards academic institutions choose to observe in awarding continuous appointments to faculty. As we shall see, almost all of these procedures have changed over the course of the last fifty years. But some other aspects of tenure have not. I take it that solitude and uncertainty, for example, remain unavoidable aspects of what comes before a tenure decision. Today, as it was for Kernan fifty years ago, time spent on the road to a tenure decision is less a period of further professional training, than a time of trial by fire, years when candidates for tenure typically learn by doing, rather than working under the watchful eyes of sympathetic masters. So it should be said that many of the feelings Kernan puts on display as he remembers working his way down this often lonely road – anxiety, incredulity, injured pride, insecurity, disillusionment, and – above all – a grim determination not to fail – should be familiar to most who have followed along behind him in

¹⁰ My account of Yale’s history draws from Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974); Roger L. Geiger, *To Advance Knowledge: The Growth of the American Research University, 1900-1940* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publications, 1986); _____ *Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Universities Since World War II* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publications, 1993); John Perry Miller, *Creating Academic Settings: High Craft and Low Cunning* (New Haven: J.S. Meon Press, 1991); Geoffrey M. Kabaservice, *The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004); Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005).

more recent decades. More important for my purposes, however, are things Kernan has overlooked. In the sections that follow, I want to show in some detail how his occasional blindness to his own good fortune inadvertently draws our attention to some of the most important changes in what “tenure” has been doing over during the past half-century. And I will begin by underlining three that I believe would stand out for other more recently tenured academics who come to Kernan’s story, as I did, by way of the 2006 **MLA Report**.

(1) *Tenure and the “Up-or-out” Rule*

We have seen that Kernan remembers that “up-or-out” and the “publish or perish” were among the rules that governed the lives of junior faculty at Yale 1954. He also remembers that at the time these rules applied elsewhere and were “not new” (119). But his memory fails him on both counts here. We know that, by the late 1950s, the phrase “up-or-out” had entered into popular parlance as a way to describe a procedure for dismissing less competent instructors and assistants. But we know nothing about the consistency with which it was enforced. Nor do we know exactly when the phrase came to describe one of relatively uniform set of procedures observed by most American colleges and universities. Two surveys of the American academic workplace in the late 1950s showed there was, in fact, nothing resembling a uniform set of review procedures for awarding tenure. “Tenure” in the sense of a continuous faculty employment was almost universally recognized. But it was embodied in what one of the reports called a “bewildering” variety of policies and plans, whose range also revealed “extraordinary differences in generosity, explicitness, and intelligibility.” Many schools then still had no formal provisions for tenure. Moreover, during years that saw an unprecedented expansion in student enrollment and faculty hiring, even institutions with announced procedures were perhaps understandably reluctant to follow them consistently. Demand for professors at all but the most elite institutions was simply too intense to invite the exercise of tough and uniform tenure judgments. What little there was in the way of efforts to establish carefully articulated and transparent tenure review procedures seem to have been designed primarily to keep promising young faculty in place.¹¹

We also have seen that Kernan had less to fear from Yale’s application of the up-or-out rule than he recalls in looking back on his first year as instructor. But why? Kernan did belong to a first, relatively small wave of American academics whose tenure standards included serious efforts to enforce the up-or-out rule. But the first lesson he learned about the rule was that there were exceptions, sometimes (as in his own case) dependent on how institutions felt about individual candidates, more often because of economic constraints that justified the postponement of a final decision. Moreover, in the mid-1960s, there was nothing new about Yale’s offering a Kernan and other members of the English department one-year appointments as associate professors without tenure. The practice of “freezing” associates dated back to the Great Depression of the 1930s, and was by no means uncommon at colleges and universities faced with financial difficulties in later decades. Also not uncommon was the strategy Harold Bloom employed: using an “outside call” that allowed him to gain a permanent appointment that without having to endure an elaborate internal review.¹²

¹¹ Theodore Caplow and Reece J. McGee, *The Academic Workplace* (New York: Basic Books, 1958), and Clark Byse and Louis Joughlin, *Tenure in American Higher Education* (Ithaca, N.Y.: 1959), pp. 132-47. As Roger Geiger notes, the effect of “outside calls” depended on the relative standing of the employing institution and the one

(2) *Publish or Perish.*

Doubtless the pressure to publish was real enough at Yale by the late 1950s. But there are reasons to wonder if it was quite as formidable as Kernan remembers. When he began his career, Yale was among a small handful of institutions that had both an announced commitment to faculty research and scholarship and the institutional resources to support that commitment. In Kernan's case, the resources included the Sterling Library (then the nation's fourth largest, and its second largest university library) and the Morse faculty fellowship program that provided him a year's leave at full pay during his probationary period. Also important was the Philip Hamilton McMillan Memorial Fund, an in-house source of subsidies for manuscripts of Yale English faculty recommended for publication in the "Yale Studies in English" series at Yale University Press. Both of Kernan's first two books were published in this series. So too were many of the first books of many of his then junior colleagues in Yale's English department, including Harold Bloom's *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1958) and landmark *The Visionary Company* (1961). Frankly, it is hard to imagine Kernan unable to publish in the years leading up to his tenure decision, even harder to imagine his research and publications would have flourished any more somewhere else.¹³

What's more, in English departments at a vast majority of American colleges and universities during the 1950s and 1960s, there simply would have been no need for Kernan to publish. And this for reasons that the 2006 **MLA Report** again helps us understand. In looking for an answer to the question of when publication of a scholarly monograph emerged as the chief requirement for tenure in MLA disciplines, the report cites the findings a now largely forgotten study of English departments done in the late 1960s.¹⁴ In a nationwide sample of 300 English departments at 4-year institutions, this study found that before 1968 neither the monograph nor any other publications were generally regarded as a principal requirement for tenure. Indeed, when asked to list criteria for deciding tenure and promotion in order of importance, only 35.4% of the sampled English departments ranked scholarship of any kind, including the monograph, first or second. By contrast, the 2006 **MLA Report** – which canvassed 1339 language and literature department in four-year, degree-granting Carnegie Doctorate-granting, Master's and Baccalaureate institutions in the continental United States – found that some forty years later almost 76% of respondents ranked publication as "very important" for earning tenure. It also found that the monograph has becoming increasingly important in comparison with other forms of scholarly publication. Almost 33% of all responding departments now consider progress towards completion of a second book "important" or "very important."¹⁵

issuing the call. (Kernan does not name the source of Harold Bloom's offer.) In the 1920s and 1930s, Geiger observes, weaker institutions ordinarily did not match outside offers. Geiger, *To Advance Knowledge*, p. 315, n39.

¹³ It is worth noting that both readers of the manuscript of Kernan's first book at Yale University Press -- Davis Harding (1914-70) and Eugene Waith (1912-2006) -- happened to be his senior colleagues in the Yale English department at the time. This arrangement, unthinkable today, goes unmentioned in *In Plato's Cave*. But the readers are named in Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire and the English Renaissance* (New Haven and London, 1959), ix.

¹⁴ Thomas W. Wilcox, *The Anatomy of College English* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1973).

¹⁵ These numbers can be broken down another way. 44.4% of the 446 Carnegie Masters and 48% of the 225 Carnegie Baccalaureate institutions who responded to the 2006 MLA survey now rank publication of a monograph as "very important" or "important." And today almost 50% of the 156 Carnegie Doctorate Institutions demand what only Yale and a small handful of other universities required 40 years ago: demonstrated progress towards a second scholarly book.

What do these numbers tell us? The authors of the 2006 **MLA Report** is right to say they show that in recent decades there has been a dramatic change in requirements for tenure and promotion, a change they identify as “the rise of the tenure monograph.” Readers who come to the 2006 **MLA Report** by way of Kernan’s memoir would want to add that the figures also show that the ‘publish-or-perish’ rule did not come into being until the late 1960s, some three to four years after Kernan was awarded tenure at Yale. So the “publish-or-perish” rule, then, turns out to be a fairly recent invention when it comes to “tenure.” And there is little mystery about why. The immediate impetus for the change is another development that goes unmentioned in Kernan’s memoirs: the unanticipated collapse of the job market for new PhDs in the late 1960s. Since then, as hiring departments across the country have come to operate in what now seems a permanent buyer’s market, they have demanded more and more of candidates seeking tenure track appointments, and in particular they have demanded more clear evidence of scholarly promise. So the “Darwinian” competition for a permanent faculty appointment Kernan thought he observed in Yale’s English department in 1954 really did not begin to set in across the country until the late 1960s. Before then, at most American colleges and universities, tenure track jobs and tenured positions were relatively low-hanging fruit. As we shall see, Kernan did have some reason to sweat getting tenure at Yale. But had his tenure decision gone the other way, there is little question he would have quickly found employment elsewhere.

(3) *Tenure and Hiring*

Whether faculty hiring practices at American universities are more rational today than they were when Kernan began his career, or whether both are equally strange, there is no question that procedures Yale followed fifty years ago, such as they were, bear little resemblance to current practice. Kernan is right to draw our attention to the fact that his years as a graduate student and untenured faculty member at Yale coincided with a major ethno-demographic transformation of the University, one that began with the admission of less privileged GI students (like Kernan himself) and the gradual lowering long-standing anti-Jewish barriers to both faculty and students.¹⁶ But Yale’s effort to transform itself into a truly national institution was in its early stages when Kernan was hired, and it did not entail a clean and sudden break with all of the central practices of the old boy system.¹⁷ During the 1950s, the professional academic career structure in the United States remained much as it was in the 1920s and 1930s. There was no national job market to speak of, let alone a standard set of protocols for hiring and promoting junior faculty. Hiring decisions often depended on personal contacts, and even the most distinguished of American universities still chose to grow their faculty largely from within by hiring their most promising graduate students

¹⁶ In the 1950s and 1960s, the flourishing of Jews at Yale proved to be the most immediately significant of these two developments. It was not until 1946 that the first Jew was appointed to a professorship at Yale College, then still the culturally strategic core of Yale University. Only twenty-four years later, 18 percent of Yale College faculty holding the rank of professor were Jewish, as were 22 percent of those holding this rank in the University as a whole. See Dan Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews at Yale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 261-68, 326.

¹⁷ John Morton Blum recalls that when he traveled to Yale in April, 1957, to discuss details of the offer of a tenured professorship, he learned that not only would the senior (and then almost entirely Protestant) professors of Yale College have to approve his appointments, they also wanted “recommendations from *bona fide* college alumni.” Blum, *A Life With History*, pp. 136-38. Blum acknowledges that some measure of anti-Semitism continued to affect senior Yale faculty in the late 1950s, but downplays it as “a conditioned response of little institutional significance.” The desire to have Yale faculty embody the values of “Yale men,” however, obviously persisted.

and publishing their first books.¹⁸ As late as 1960, almost half the Yale faculty were Yale products. Whether he knew it or not, Kernan benefitted from this arrangement. When he was awarded tenure in 1965, all five candidates for the four tenured openings in English had Yale Ph.D.s; three also had Yale B.A.s.¹⁹

What exactly has changed when it comes to hiring practices during the last four decades? Many answers come to mind. Perhaps the most obvious is that the coming of the buyer's market has made competition for tenure-track jobs fiercely competitive. But it also has helped – as the **2006 MLA Report** notes in passing – to make procedures for hiring vastly more equitable and transparent. Autocratic chairmen and institutional faculty inbreeding – the two linchpins of the old-boy system – are largely things of the past.²⁰ Today hiring for tenure-track positions is almost as protracted an undertaking as the tenure review process. Once a requested appointment is approved, an official announcement usually is placed in the fall issue of *Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)* and other visible professional journals and magazines. Applications come in from across the country and, in some cases, around the world, often numbering in the hundreds. Applications are reviewed by a search committee, and promising applicants are then asked to send in samples of their writings and request letters from their references. When the MLA convenes for its annual meeting in late December, an initial “short” list of candidates – typically twelve to fifteen – are scheduled for screening interviews with the search committee. Three or four of the top prospects are invited to campus for a day or two during which they present a formal talk to the department, meet with individual faculty members, and are interviewed by senior academic administrators. Then the search committee determines its preferred list of final candidates, and waits to see what comes of official job offers to its top candidates.²¹ One would never guess in reading *In Plato's Cave* that fifty years ago such an expensive, time-consuming operation – consciously conducted in the interest of fairness and equal opportunity – was not standard practice.²²

So far I've been re-telling Kernan's tenure tale to examine three answers to the question of what “tenure” did for him during the first phase of his career at Yale. The first was to specify a timetable combined and a decision

¹⁸ Looking back on the start of his career in the mid-1950s, Geoffrey Hartman recalls that, “Patronage was the order of the day and lack of it could prove fatal to a career. Yet it might also be used to circumvent the rules in a generous spirit.” In Hartman's case, it was Henri Peyre (then Chair of Yale's French Department) who helped ‘circumvent the rules.’ Peyre personally carried the manuscript of his first book, Hartman tells us, to the Director of Yale University Press, and then arranged for positive readers reports from two of his other Yale teachers in comparative literature. See Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale*, pp. 15, 29.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that several Jews hired to tenured positions in the English department at Yale in the 1960s – e.g., Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Donald Hirsch, and Harry Berger – also received their Ph.D.s from Yale.

²⁰ Another aspect of the coming of a tight buyer's market should be noted. The end of economic good times in the job market has not impeded a dramatic growth in the number of women entering the academic profession. In fact, women are now the numerical majority in MLA disciplines. But there is a perhaps cruel irony here. For while the ‘feminization’ of MLA disciplines is another development that served to sweep away the old boy system, it also has helped to sustain the oversupply of academic labor.

²¹ My account of a typical MLA disciplinary search borrows from William Pritchard, *English Papers*, 107.

²² One also would never guess in reading Kernan's memoir that, when he entered Yale Graduate School in 1951, the number of scholars who taught in MLA disciplines had just entered a period of extraordinary expansion. The membership of the MLA was almost 6500 in 1950; 11,600 in 1960; almost 21,000 in 1965, the year Kernan was awarded tenure.

rule for considering his promotion to a continuous appointment; the second was to identify professional standards that would be brought to bear in making a final decision about such an appointment; and the third was to identify those who had institutional authority to make that decision. Each of these could be described one of the protocols Yale observed in making continuous faculty appointments, and at least two things can be said about them taken as a group. The first is simply that they were very much worth having, even if inconsistently applied. The second is that, whatever one makes of Yale's particular definition and application of these protocols, they could hardly be considered universal or timeless. Not only was Kernan's road to tenure not quite as rough as he recalls, it was in many respects remarkably different from the one he would have experienced, had he tried to launch his career in, say, 1974, rather than 1954. Let me turn now to two other aspects of Kernan's case that more closely resemble current practice.

(4) The Complexity of the Tenure Review Process

In numbering himself among "the lucky," Kernan does not, I think, mean to suggest that Yale's decision to award him tenure was accidental or uncaused. Even so, it is hard to explain why he views the process Yale observed in making that decision with such incredulity. Indeed, had Kernan bothered to inquire about how tenure decisions were made in other English departments across the country in the mid- 1960s, I suspect he would presented Yale's multi-level process in considerably more positive light.

Here again the 1969 survey of English departments cited in the **MLA Report** provides information about an academic landscape more complicated than Kernan has managed to reconstruct. According to that survey, during the years of Kernan's long probationary period at Yale, authority for tenure decisions in a large majority of other American colleges and universities lay almost entirely in the hands of the department chairmen. In 42.8% of the department surveyed in 1969, tenure decisions were made by the chairman alone; in an additional 21%, tenure decisions were made by the chairman and an advisory committee appointed by him. Not surprisingly, the 1969 survey's findings about promotion after tenure matched those for tenure: in 44.6% of the departments, decisions about promotion were made by the chairman alone; in 22.7%, they were made by the chairman and a committee appointed by the chair.

These data describe some of the key points of an almost entirely male patronage system that dated back to the first decade of the 20th century. By Kernan's own account, Yale's tenure review process in the mid-1960s clearly was something different. But what made it different? The explanation requires another look at the long passage in which Kernan's recounts his own tenure decision and some additional digging in Yale's history.

If one were to ask Kernan himself to strip his long passage of its irreverent tone, and then re-write it to make it sound something like what one might encounter in a current faculty handbook, how might it read? A plausible imagined revision might look like this:

At Yale University, the standard procedure for academic appointments to tenured positions at the end of the probationary plays itself out in four interconnected stages:

(1) The first takes place in the home department of the faculty candidate. Full professors in a department, after reading all the candidate's writings, meet to discuss the candidate and vote. Each professor in turn will be called

on to give an opinion of the candidate. After all views are heard, a vote will be taken, also in turn and by voice ballot. If the department's verdict is negative, the department chairman will notify the candidate immediately; if positive, the Chair will forward the department's vote to the University's Humanities Committee.

(2) The Humanities Committee is composed of tenured professors from Yale's various humanities departments and chaired by the Director of the Humanities Division. Members of the committee will read the recommended candidate's work, interview the Chair of the recommending department, and vote whether to send the name on to the Board of Permanent Officers.

(3) The Board of Permanent Officers is composed of all full professors in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and chaired in alternate years by graduate and undergraduate deans. If no member of the Board objects to the nomination, it will be forwarded to the Provost for final review.

(4) The Provost presents the nomination for final review by the Academic Committee of the Board of Trustees, which has the legal authority to confirm all recommendations for promotion to tenured associate or senior positions. The University Secretary will duly notify the candidate of the Board's decision.

My point here is not simply to offer a sympathetic re-statement of Yale's tenure review process in the mid-1960s. I also want to show that Kernan himself has drawn attention to several broad features of a tenure review process at the time was distinctive to Yale, but have since become standard practice across the country. These include the fact that today most tenure review processes consist of a sequence of stages, beginning with deliberations in a tenure candidate's department and progressing up through several higher levels of institutional authority; that a candidate's qualifications are reviewed and evaluated at each stage; that the multi-level process is by design complex and thorough; and that as a result the a tenure review decision is a culling process that almost invariably extends over several months. Taken as a group, these same broad features also give us a fourth answer to the question of what "tenure" did for Alvin Kernan at the outset of his career at Yale. They provided a complex protocol for voting on his permanent appointment to the faculty.

But what explains the complexity of Yale's voting protocols in the mid-1960s? Part of the answer lies in the fact that Yale's efforts to upgrade its faculty in the late 1950s continued into the early 1960s when it also began to expand the size of its faculty. Between 1954-55 and 1964-5, in an effort to achieve greater scholarly "critical mass" in its academic departments, Yale grew its total faculty by 25%, and increased tenured faculty appointments in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences from 41% to 51%. Between 1963 and 1968, it increased its tenure-track and tenured faculty by 80%. These numbers clearly tell of a substantial building up of Yale's faculty during the late 1950s and 1960s. But as Geoffrey Kabaservice has pointed out, the buildup did not take the simple form of a general dispersal of funds. It proceeded instead as a deliberate exercise in planning that entailed both shrewd decisions by ambitious new senior academic administrators – led by Provost and later President Kingman Brewster – and a fundamental reorganization of voting protocols for faculty appointments that aimed at establishing a more stringent review process. Kernan's long passage loosely names some of the parties who figured in the reorganization. It only hints at the purpose of the change, however, and says nothing about why it was made in the first place.

Under Yale's new procedures, the initiative in considering individual tenure appointments rested – as it had

in decades past – with individual academic departments. Final authority for awarding tenure also still lay in the hands of the President and Corporation. But under procedures revised when Brewster became Provost in 1961, authority for directly recommending appointments to the President and Corporation was now lodged in a new institution: the Joint Meeting of two separate Boards of Permanent Officers (BPO) that then governed Yale College and the Graduate School. (Each BPO was composed of all the full professors at each school.) Under arrangements designed to reduce long-standing tensions between the two schools in matters of faculty appointments, Yale College and the Graduate School now delegated authority over appointments in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences to the Joint Meeting. And it was here that all departmental proposals for tenured faculty appointments now had to be reviewed and approved by newly established Divisional Tenure Appointment Committees that were the main components of Joint Meeting of the two BPOs. Three and eventually four committees were established for tenured appointments in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences – which was later divided into two committees, one for the physical sciences, the other for the biological sciences. A joint committee to review all junior appointments was also established, so all starting tenure-track appointments also had to be reviewed by the Joint Meeting of the BPOs of the two schools. Following a model first employed by Harvard in the early 1940s, Yale in some cases also began to employ testimony from outside experts to assess the qualifications of proposed faculty appointments in problematic academic fields. And, finally, at all points along the line, the new decision rule was that permanent appointments at Yale were now to be made only when there was a substantial consensus at all levels of the process.

Yale's tenure review process obviously was complicated and cumbersome. But no one reading this description of the process should have trouble in grasping its immediate intent: meld faculty appointment and promotion procedures at Yale College and the Graduate School. Understanding its broader purpose, however, requires a final excursion into Yale's postwar history. Compared to the nation's other leading research universities in the late 1940s and 1950s, Yale certainly was among the most conservative. In its faculty, that conservatism was visible in a strong preference for hiring from within. (On the occasion of Yale's 250th anniversary in 1951, *Time* magazine reported that "55% of its faculty are Yale men.") It also found expression in the archaic institutional organization of Yale's Faculty of Arts and Sciences as two different faculties: Yale College and the Graduate School. When Kernan arrived in 1954, each school to a considerable extent represented divergent, perhaps even opposite, outlooks prevailing in the University. Yale College, which had primary responsibility for all undergraduate education, was strongly committed to the traditional liberal arts, especially the humanities. Historically, its standards for faculty appointments had prized teaching ability and the collegial reliability of "Yale men" over research and scholarship. The Graduate School, which had responsibility for all non-professional advanced degrees and some Masters degrees with designation, reserved its faculty appointments for research scholars of proven ability. And it was mostly by gradually filling the ranks of the Graduate School faculty that Yale built its reputation as a research university during the first half of the twentieth century. This work, however, often took place as an institutional tug-of-war. Graduate School faculty – especially in the sciences – were usually peripheral players at Yale College. Their appointments sometimes had to be pushed through in the face of strong opposition by tradition-minded senior faculty at the college, as well as the sometimes unsteady commitments of

presidents ambivalent about Yale's vision of itself as a research university.

Despite the problems it posed for developing a coherent staffing plan, this bifurcated system for faculty appointments in the liberal arts and sciences served Yale well enough before World War II. Coupled with Yale's ample resources, it also allowed the research university to develop without significantly altering the spirit that still animated tradition-minded Yale College. But this system ultimately would leave Yale poorly positioned to respond to new forces at work in the postwar era. At other American research universities, academic departments had become strong advocates of professional disciplinary standards and so provided a natural impetus for faculty strengthening. But Yale College, with its strong traditions and pride in past accomplishments, remained the most insular of the nation's research faculties, with some of its departments under the command of senior faculty who feared hiring abler scholars than themselves. Perhaps more importantly, at the end of a decade that saw other leading research universities embracing unprecedented new opportunities for scientific research provided by federal grants and the growth of "big science," Yale remained strikingly weak in the sciences. And its weakness here was exacerbated by another archaic feature of Yale's organization: the division between Yale College and the Sheffield Scientific School. This arrangement has significantly inhibited the growth and development of Yale's scientific departments during the 1920s and 1930s. Sheffield suffered from inadequate space and was underfunded in comparison with Yale's other schools. Its requests for faculty appointments in Yale College were often ignored because of lagging undergraduate enrollment in the sciences. Discretionary appointments by the Graduate School could have alleviated this situation, but few were made.

If all this left Yale strikingly unprepared to find its place in America's new postwar research economy, matters were made even more difficult by A. Whitney Griswold, Brewster predecessor as Yale's president. Strongly committed to the traditional liberal arts, and deeply distrustful of federal sponsorship of university research, Griswold by instinct was largely out of touch with America's postwar research economy. The upshot was that, by the late 1950s, just as the golden age of academic science was beginning, Yale faced serious difficulties in both recruiting and retaining top scientists. In fact, by contemporary standards, it could hardly be described as a major international research university.

After Brewster was appointed Yale's president in October, 1963, he took several steps to address the concerns of those who viewed Yale as an institution in decline. Perhaps the best known grew out of his sympathy towards science and technology, a sympathy that resulted not only in a substantial growth in the size and quality of Yale's faculty in the sciences, but also encouragement and support for their efforts to obtain grants from foundations and federal agencies. (Indeed, over the course of Kernan's eleven-year probationary period, federal research money increased from 4.6 % of Yale's budget to 22.9 percent.) The new committee-based tenure review system Brewster had helped to fashion as Provost directly complemented this strategy. Its target, however, was the Faculty of Arts and Sciences taken as a whole. And at the heart of this system was Brewster's new vision of Yale as a true academic meritocracy. Faculty merit now would not only be more consistently defined across departments, it would be more consistently identified as a matter of a candidate's international standing among his professional peers. Yale was no longer in the business of training its own closely-knit faculty, in other words; it was intent on

claiming its place among the first ranks of the world's research universities. Results were fairly quick in coming. In the early years, Graduate School Dean John Perry Miller estimated that each of the new divisional committees annually rejected four to five appointments proposed by the departments, sometimes amid bitter controversy. By 1965, a faculty committee report on Yale's tenure policies and procedures tenure estimated that less than a third of its non-tenure faculty members were likely to be promoted to permanent appointments.²³

And so it turns out that Alvin Kernan did have good reason to sweat getting tenure at Yale. But for reasons he has barely understood.

(5) *Tenure, Academic Freedom, and Time*

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Kernan's tenure tale may be that "academic freedom" never finds its way onto the list of his hopes and fears and reasons to worry about or want tenure. Why not? Arriving at Yale at the height of the Cold War, Kernan began his career in a time of ideological crisis, arguably the most intense crisis in the history of the American university. He can hardly have failed to notice what was happening around him. But there is only one episode from the McCarthy era — the controversy that followed publication of William F. Buckley Jr.'s tract *God and Man at Yale* — that finds its way into Kernan's memoir, and the best one can say about the brief account he offers is that it is perfunctory.

Believers in tenure sometimes present professors as people who potentially always have something controversial or unpopular to say, and so deserve protection from those who might take offense at what they say. Kernan never says directly why he wanted tenure.²⁴ But protecting any controversial ideas he might have had during his long probationary period clearly had little to do with it. In fact, for all the disturbing uncertainty that he remembers surrounded the tenure review process at Yale in the mid-1960s, what Kernan recalls feeling once the process had run its course is that someone once told him that "tenure was the shortest-lived pleasure he had ever experienced, and after the fact it is true" (131).

One can only speculate why a prize that required so much time and effort to secure gave so little satisfaction. One answer that comes to mind is time itself, although in two different senses. When Kernan was awarded tenure at the relatively advanced age of 41, he was in many perhaps obvious ways not the same person he was at 30. When he arrived at Yale in 1954, he had barely finished his dissertation and had only one year of teaching experience. Given the high stakes, it's tempting to say that Kernan took on tenure at Yale more in the spirit of his actual contemporary George Mallory than the mythical Jason. Tenure's "there-ness" constituted a key professional landmark. Not exactly the biggest prize any professional academic hopes for over the course of a career, but certainly the prize he must have to make a life-long academic career possible. Yet it took Kernan eleven years to climb his academic Everest, and when the moment of his successful ascent to the summit came, it seemed

²³ *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Policies and Procedures for Tenure Appointments* (Yale Univ, 1965), p. 28.

²⁴ It is worth noting that both defenders and critics of tenure generally neglect that it is a practice that has long been justified in economic terms. Kernan does too, but he does not hide the fact that one of the issues at stake in his tenure decision was safeguarding the long-term pleasures of comfortable middle-class life for his wife and children.. A couple of years before Kernan came up for tenure, Yale in fact had helped to lay the groundwork for that life by giving him a mortgage for a costly eleven-room brick house outside of New Haven.

beside the point, and with good reason. By 1965, Kernan had climbed many other formidable academic mountains, and taken together his various successes, over time, had firmly established his reputation as an outstanding teacher and scholar. When seen against that background, Yale's decision to award him tenure seems hardly a decision at all, then, let alone an achievement he could readily identify as his own. It was more a belated act of institutional recognition or validation. Little wonder the actual award of tenure turned out to be a fleeting pleasure.

Another perhaps more practical lesson Kernan may have learned about the relationship between time and tenure emerged from the fact that when it came to decisions to award continuous faculty appointments, Yale did not have openings available for all qualified candidates, and made no apology for the shortage. Funds were not unlimited, after all. More significantly, at Yale "tenure" in the mid-1960s was not considered a due reward for past institutional services, no matter how valuable. Simply giving one's time in service to Yale as teacher or dependable professional colleague was not viewed as unique among the ways of acquiring merit. Only candidates for permanent appointments who had proved themselves to be scholars of exceptional distinction and promise would be invited to stay.

What is Tenure?/ What Can We Learn from the History of Tenure?

I want end with a definition of tenure, and some thoughts on what rigorous historical investigation might contribute to a better understanding of tenure. As I said at the outset, I take it there is no grasping tenure simply as a concept.²⁵ Tenure is better understood as (1) a *practice* defined by (2) *a set of protocols* (3) that have been *created and elaborated over time* (4) with the aim of *assuring professional academics* that colleges and universities will observe *due process* (5) in *making faculty appointments* (so-called "tenure-track" appointments) *that may lead to continuous appointments*, (6) *promoting or dismissing faculty who are eligible for continuous appointments*, and (7) and *dismissing faculty who have been awarded continuous appointments*.²⁶ My definition admittedly is a bit cumbersome, but so too is the current American practice of tenure. I also would risk saying that everything that the "tenure" does, every effect it has both on the careers of individual professional academics and on the operations of colleges and universities grows out of what strike me as these seven incontestable facts about tenure.

At least three features of this definition are worth highlighting. The first is that it underlines the fact that *the meaning of tenure is context-sensitive*. For individual professional academics, "tenure" unavoidably means different things at different points in the course of their professional careers. Kernan again can serve as a case in point. At the start of his career in 1954, tenure was essentially a professional screening process designed to identify whether he was worthy of a permanent appointment. Eleven years later, the award of a continuous appointment provided him certain privileges and protections typically associated with the word tenure.²⁷ It also made him one

²⁵ By this I do not mean "tenure" has no content as concept, just that – as this essay tries to show – its content has been variable over time and there is no single rationale behind it.

²⁶ This is not the place for a full explanation of what I mean by "due process." It is enough to say just two things here. First, in the realm of academic tenure it is best understood as protection against arbitrary decisions. Second, no particular set of protocols flows naturally out of a commitment to due process.

²⁷ The protections and privileges of tenure typically include: (a) continuous appointment as associate or full professor

of the resident agents of the tenure review process. For central to the modern American tenure review process is the presumption that already tenured faculty, who have weathered the same process, are the ones most competent to assess qualities of their own kind. Kernan was also appointed Associate Provost in 1965, however, and this made him an agent of tenure in a second and different sense. Tenured faculty by no means exercise absolute authority in the tenure review process. They are constrained by a probationary timetable and an up-or-out decision rule. They are also constrained by senior academic administrators who not only have the authority to enforce these procedural constraints, but also view the outcome of individual tenure decisions in a different light. From the vantage point of Presidents, Provosts, Associate Provosts and Deans, all tenure decisions are interconnected, partly because every tenure decision represents a decades-long commitment of an institution's resources, regardless of its financial health, partly because every tenure decision must be viewed as a matter of whether or not a tenure candidate will contribute to an institution's overall well-being.

My definition also underlines that fact that *tenure is not an end in itself, but a practice American colleges and universities impose on themselves with the aim of accomplishing certain institutional purposes*. Tenure's value (or disvalue), then, depends not only on one's view of those purposes, but also on whether one believes the procedures that currently define tenure actually accomplish them. Or put another way, if the whole point of "tenure" is to help individual colleges and universities recruit, evaluate, and reward faculty according to what they have decided their fundamental purposes are, it follows that some ways of recruiting, evaluating, and rewarding will prove themselves better than others. Not better *a priori*, but verifiably better over time and with respect to what individual colleges and universities consider their fundamental purposes.

From this perspective, I take it there is nothing inevitable about the current procedures that surround tenure. Nor is there anything illegitimate in asking hard questions about why access to tenure happens to take the forms that it does, and if these forms accomplish their announced purpose. One example will suffice here. When the current tenure review process works as designed, its proponents say, it serves as a finely grained screen that separates quality from mediocrity. And at first glance one would think that a process in which a specified "probationary" period culminates in an "up-or-out" decision must always yield a high degree of selectivity. But how, then, does one explain the 90% success rate in MLA disciplines between 1994-95 and 2003-2004? And how can one avoid the conclusion that at a vast majority of American colleges and universities the outcome of current tenure review decisions, in MLA disciplines, has become a foregone conclusion? These days, tenure decisions are, in effect, made at the point of hiring, leaving one to wonder: what's the point of an elaborate and time-consuming review process that so rarely turns tenure candidates away?²⁸

Finally, there is the feature of my definition that interests me most: it underlines the fact that tenure is a

until voluntary retirement or resignation, with possible exception of dismissal for cause or termination due to the discontinuation or reduction of a program; (b) equitable compensation and benefits; (c) continued institutional support for teaching and scholarship; and (d) continued involvement in defining the academic mission of the college or university.

²⁸ It is fair to ask if the 'rubber-stamping' character of the tenure review process is currently limited to MLA disciplines. A recent system-wide study of tenure at the University of Colorado suggests that it is not. Of 95 tenure files reviewed from all across the system, 95% resulted in tenure appointments. *Independent Report on Tenure-Related Processes*

practice that has been “created and elaborated over time.” *Those who remember that tenure has a past should see it differently from those without such a memory.* But what exactly do they see? At least three answers emerge from my re-telling of Alvin Kernan’s tenure tale. I’ll close with a brief statement of each.

The first is simply a need to make a sharp distinction between “tenure” as a safeguard for academic freedom and “tenure” as the complex set of protocols institutions choose to observe in awarding permanent faculty appointments. Those who see the primary purpose of tenure as protection for scholarly independence are likely to think of tenure and academic freedom as inseparable. Kernan’s case tells us the difficulties with this view are two-fold. First, it does little to explain the actual protocols of tenure. It also does not help to sort out the tangled history of these protocols. The little we currently know about tenure reform in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, tells us it had almost nothing to do with safeguarding academic freedom. It was instead a matter of quality control – or more precisely, of ambitious and remarkably powerful presidents and senior academic administrators like Kingman Brewster bent on raising the academic status of their institutions by (a) overturning arbitrary and haphazard appointment practices of senior faculty and (b) creating a meritocracy based on open and rigorous competition for jobs and a tenure review process in which the concept of faculty merit was now re-grounded primarily in research and published scholarship.²⁹

Seeing that tenure has a history also means you know that recounting its past involves more than just collecting and reviewing individual tenure cases. It requires sorting out a complex set of aims, actions, and expectations that have defined institutional relationships. Typically, these include roles of authority, professional standards, constraints, rewards, and sanctions – all of which clearly have changed over time. When Kernan started teaching at Yale in 1954, authority for tenure decisions at most American colleges and universities lay entirely in the hands of Boards of Trustees, Presidents, senior academic administrators, and department chairs. Only in the last three decades of the twentieth century did it become standard practice to ground tenure decisions in the assumption that the most competent judges of the qualities of a tenure candidate were already tenured faculty working in a similar field. The aims of “tenure” understood as a permanent appointment also have changed over time. Safeguarding academic freedom of course long has been among them. But there have been several others: attracting talented people to poorly paid jobs; reinforcing the desire of talented people to stay at institutions that hire them; upgrading the faculty by carefully screening junior faculty to eliminate all but the most talented; and – most recently – identifying faculty talent chiefly as a matter of specialized research and published scholarship that is widely perceived as outstanding by their disciplinary peers. The means have changed, too. Fifty years ago, there was no standard tenure review process, let alone a consensus regarding specific criteria for acquiring, denying, or terminating tenure. As a result, American colleges and universities routinely awarded and denied tenure with little regard for due process. Until the late 1960s, tenure decisions were mostly top-down and in-house affairs, decisions

at the *University of Colorado* (April 24, 2006), p. 16.

²⁹ Alongside Kingman Brewster, one would have to put Clark Kerr (California), Frederick Terman (Stanford), and Abram Sachar (Brandeis) at the top of the list of ambitious and powerful senior academic administrators in the 1950s and 1960s.

in which ability certainly mattered, but local traditions and purposes mattered even more.

Finally, talk about bringing ‘the history of tenure’ into the light of day sounds like a major undertaking, and it is. Certainly those of us concerned about the future of tenure should want to know whether there are patterns in tenure’s historical variations from which we can learn. Yet if we think about “tenure” as I have defined it here – essentially, as a set of procedural guidelines for faculty hiring, promotion, and dismissal – the most striking thing about “tenure” at the moment is that we having nothing resembling a rigorous and systematic history of its development over time. The truth is that the standardization of the tenure review process is essentially what ‘the history of tenure’ was all about in the last three decades of the twentieth century. And the three core ideas that inform today’s standard review process – a specified “probationary period,” the “up-or-out” rule, and disciplinary “peer review” – are similarly recent inventions. But so far as I know there are no books or articles that either carefully recount the story of how today’s standard review process came into being or systematically explain the distinctive ideas that inform that process. With a bare handful of relatively unknown exceptions, the same is true for the history of tenure review process at the level of individual colleges and universities. At best, the question of tenure is touched on only in passing in existing institutional histories.³⁰

Little wonder, then, that so much of Alvin Kernan’s tenure tale needed amending. Like the rest of us, when it comes to the actual history of the American academic practice of tenure, he had little to draw on but memories. Memories are important tools in reconstructing that history, because they remind us that individual scholars are among the fundamental units of the practice of tenure. But memoirs are not always reliable tools.³¹

³⁰ “Bare handful” may be an exaggeration. To date, I have found only two focused (but also brief) efforts to explore the history of the tenure review process at the level of an individual institution: “Tenure,” in *Encyclopedia of Union College History*, compiled and edited by Wayne Somers (Schenectady, N.Y.: Union College Press, 2003), pp. 720-23, and Catie Rosenthal, “Tenuous Tenure, Economics, and Academic Freedom: Rice University and the Evolution of Tenure, 1935-1962 (unpublished undergraduate paper, Rice University, Department of History). Among Somers’s most interesting findings is that until some time in the late 1950s, Union’s president made all tenure decisions (as well as salary and promotion decisions) without formal consultation, hearings, or guidelines. We also learn from Rosenthal that Rice University first adopted an official tenure policy in May, 1962. Before then, Rice’s Board of Trustees maintained power to remove at will even full professors. In practice, however, well before 1962, Rice faculty enjoyed a system of *de facto* or informal tenure. Faculty members simply assumed that as long as they did their jobs, their appointments would be continued. At all but the most elite institutions, I suspect that assumption was widespread in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

³¹ On the challenges that memoirs pose for historians, see Paula Fass, “The Memoir Problem,” *Reviews in American History* 34 (2006), 107-23.