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Tenure Matters: A Historian's Perspective

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Abstract

This paper juxtaposes (i) the findings of the 2006 Modern Language Association Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion with (ii) the story that Alvin Kernan tells -- in his professorial memoir *In Plato's Cave* (1999) -- about his pursuit of tenure at Yale in the 1950s and early 1960s to advance the view that "tenure" is best understood as a practice defined by a set of protocols that have been created and elaborated over time. Seeing that tenure has a history, I argue, requires sorting out a complex set of aims, actions, and expectations that have defined institutional relationships. These include roles of authority, professionals' standards, constraints, rewards, and sanctions, all of which have changed over time. When Kernan began his career sixty years ago, for example, authority for tenure decisions at almost all American colleges and universities lay entirely in the hands of boards of trustees, presidents, senior academic administrators, and department chairmen. Only in the last 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 candidates for tenure were already tenured faculty working in a similar field. The aims of "tenure" understood simply as a continuous faculty appointment also have changed over time. Safeguarding academic freedom long has been among them. But there have been several others: attracting 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 -- as the 2006 MLA Task Force Report makes clear -- identifying faculty talent chiefly as a matter of specialized research and

published scholarship that is perceived as outstanding by their disciplinary peers. The means have changed too. Fifty years ago, except at a small handful of elite institutions like Yale, there was nothing resembling today's elaborate and time-consuming tenure review process, let alone a consensus regarding specific criteria or protocols for acquiring, denying, or terminating continuous faculty appointments. As a result, most American colleges and universities routinely awarded and denied continuous faculty appointments with little regard for due process. In using Kernan's tenure tale to draw attention to the largely neglected history of tenure, my aim is not to build a new argument for tenure, nor propose alternatives. Rather, I want to call attention to and account for ways of thinking about tenure that go well beyond its familiar but ultimately one-dimensional identification as a necessary safeguard of academic freedom. My aim is to identify and explore the origins of central pieces of the procedural framework that defines the current American practice of awarding continuous faculty appointments.

This essay began as an effort to fill a void that 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—then dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at NYU, and former director of the MacArthur 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 or to name names of other audiences she believed 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 a historian's effort to explore several issues I believe would have to be addressed in fashioning such a statement.² With one significant exception—the history of tenure—these issues should be familiar enough to anyone with more than a passing understanding of American academic tenure. I also should say at the start that, like Stimpson, 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 my belief. 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 several elements that have come to define the practice, it is by no means obvious they all fit together logically, let alone that each deserves a passionate defense.

Consider two of many puzzles about tenure. The first emerges in looking closely at its most familiar definition and defense. Faculty members who are awarded “tenure,” its proponents typically say, are given continuous appointments 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 PhD looking for a starting full-time faculty appointment would be quick to tell you that the beating heart of the modern American practice of academic tenure lies in the elaborate and time-consuming procedures colleges and universities choose to observe in awarding permanent appointments. Some might also tell you 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 must be demonstrated fairly quickly, usually in 6–7 years, and almost everywhere today the decision is based on the principle of “up or out.” Continuous appointments are conditioned 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 faculty who already hold continuous appointments.³ Whatever benefits the award of “tenure” may bring to individual professors or to the public at large, American colleges and universities certainly do not bestow them on faculty members who begin their careers intent on taking their time and speaking their minds regardless of consequences.

Taken in its entirety, the current American practice of academic tenure is guided largely by protocols that date back to the early twentieth century and have their origins in the desire of faculty to be involved in all decisions that, for whatever reason, look toward dismissal. Over time, this desire—essentially a demand for procedural due process—has to come to mean involvement not only before such decisions become irreversible but also in a manner that assigns faculty roles as evaluators of alleged inadequacies and offenses and judges of disputed facts. More recently, the practice of tenure also has come to mean observing a timetable and decision rules that have extended procedural due process into the realms of faculty hiring and promotion, and thereby reinforced the practice of faculty self-regulation. But it would be misleading to completely assimilate due process protocols regarding faculty dismissal to those governing faculty hiring and promotion, and most certainly a mistake to assume their histories are conterminous.⁴

Now consider a second puzzle that emerges from a careful reading of 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 were 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 paints a mostly troubling picture. For those who already believe in the value of tenure as currently practiced, there is some good news. Demands placed on candidates for tenure—especially demands for publication—in fact have been expanding in kind and quality since the mid-1990s. But 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 percent—a number that may strike some as remarkably high.

But then comes a good deal of countervailing bad news. The 2006 MLA report tells of a professional academic workplace that has been a buyer's market for almost four decades now, and where the number of qualified candidates seeking tenure-track positions still far outnumbers the available positions. Between 1994–95 and 2003–4, fewer than 40 percent 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.⁵ 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 tenure in mind. The 2006 MLA report echoes the view of many 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 percent of faculty members nationwide were part-time employees. By the early 1990s, part-time employees were 40 percent 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 positions. Between 2001 and 2003, the number of part-time faculty jobs in degree-granting institutions increased from 44 percent to 46 percent, and it almost certainly will surpass 50 percent by the middle of this decade.

What should we make of the relative decline in the ranks of tenured faculty? The authors of the 2006

MLA report answer that 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 that the report 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 ongoing increase in the number of part-time and full-time NTT faculty is cause for real alarm, surely what makes it alarming is not the prospect of longer hours for faculty fortunate enough to hold tenured or tenure-track appointments. The almost obvious reason tenure is on shaky ground, one would think, is that those who control resources needed to make tenured and tenure-track appointments no longer view such appointments as the only viable models for employment 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 observed. The report’s implicit conviction may be, as she suggests, that tenure does matter. Its implicit conclusion, however, is that tenure is likely to matter less and less in decades to come. It appears that what we believers in tenure need at the moment, then, 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?

What should we make of a word whose meaning is many-sided and whose future is apparently so uncertain? There is little reason to think that a “definition and defense” is the best place to start. Indeed, it is tempting to say that the very word *tenure* has become unmanageably ambiguous.⁶ Is tenure meant 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 a site more 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. It is that over time the word *tenure* has been employed and remade to serve a number of distinctive purposes, some of which are continuous, some of which are 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 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 the question, yet in posing it also note that I do not know if 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. My purpose here, then, is not to take sides. It is to do what historians often do: tell a story that should help to explain the way things are.

My story is a selective and critical retelling 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 early 1960s. I have seized on Kernan’s tenure story—recounted in considerable detail in his professorial memoir *In Plato’s Cave* (1999)⁷—for two reasons. Because it retraces the first phase of a 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.⁸ More important for my purposes, his tenure tale also is interesting for what it reveals about several issues I believe have to be addressed in any adequate effort to understand the distinctive things the American practice of academic tenure does, and how those things have changed and multiplied over time. After I have finished coaxing Kernan’s memoir to shed light on these matters, I’ll conclude with what I take to be a historian’s definition of tenure, and some thoughts on what should come from efforts to investigate tenure’s past with rigorous care and accuracy. Along the way, where it helps to clarify or add weight to my discussion, I also take a close look at some of the other findings of the 2006 MLA report.

In Search of the “Golden Fleece”: Alvin Kernan at Yale, 1954–1965

Alvin Kernan got on the road to tenure in March 1954 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 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 RPI at the time. The others were finishing his Yale doctoral dissertation and having his doctorate conferred at the university's upcoming June commencement ceremony. None proved to be a problem. Three months later, on what he remembers as a bright and sunny day when Yale was still in "all its Gothic glory," Kernan 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. Because Kernan was one of a then "unheard-of number" (85) of ten new English instructors Yale hired in the fall of 1954, he arrived with no expectation of earning tenure. But tenure turned out to be a "golden fleece" that "glittered so brightly" it was "impossible to resist trying for it" (130). Kernan recalls, too, that he arrived knowing Yale's rules for trying included the now familiar "up or out" and "publish or perish." Or more precisely, in 1954, new 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 a continuous faculty appointment was conditional on promotion to associate professor, and promotion required one acclaimed scholarly book as well as several articles published in leading refereed journals.

Kernan's professional life during his first ten years at Yale 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. 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 a 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 important, Yale University Press also published his first scholarly monograph, *The Cankered Muse: Satire in the English Renaissance* (1959), a book that grew out of his doctoral dissertation on the English poet and playwright John Marston (1575–1634). 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 would stand as a "contribution towards a wider interpretation" of the dynamics of satire.⁹ Fifty-five 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 of the university's residential colleges.

But Kernan also had money worries on the road to tenure. 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 during the school year and the summers, including clerical work at the Yale Shakespeare Institute in nearby Stratford, Connecticut. Kernan also found time to produce 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, accompanied by his essays on various aspects of theater. In 1965 he edited and wrote a general introduction for *Classics of Modern Theater*, a collection of modern drama from Henrik Ibsen to Bertoldt Brecht and Eugène Ionesco. Both textbooks sold well over one hundred thousand copies. Kernan's Signet edition of *Othello*, still in print, has sold more than 1 million copies.

By any reasonable standard, all this made for a challenging and eventful life, 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 competition at Yale, however, tells more of folly and irresponsible behavior than of the academic equivalent of natural selection (whatever that might be). Four brilliant young art historians are dismissed because their tenured senior colleagues are intimidated by their intelligence. A junior member of the English department who arrives a few years after Kernan is voted tenure by the senior professors, only to have the recommendation refused by a superior university-wide committee, and then have those who voted for him immediately lose interest in his cause. Most of the figures Kernan mentions by name—such as William McDonald, William Crelly, Spiro Kostoff, and Howard Felperin—went on to have successful careers elsewhere. Others weren't so lucky. Kernan tells of one hapless, unnamed assistant professor who was found drunk early one morning in front of Yale's Sterling Library with skin burned off his feet. He had spilled a kettle of boiling water on his feet while trying to make coffee. "Not knowing what else to do," Kernan observes, "he went and stood in front of the library, as if the all-powerful books could heal him" (130).

This last episode may be funny in a dark way. Kernan is more bitterly amused when it comes to memories of his dealings with his senior colleagues and former teachers. At the time, support for tenure from the senior professor in one's field was considered crucial for tenure at Yale. Kernan's senior professor was Charles Prouty, then a well-known Shakespeare scholar, also former director of his dissertation. 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 often "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 that 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.¹⁰

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 is that Kernan believes he had chased a moving target. He tells us that when he came up for tenure on schedule in 1964—apparently without his knowledge—the bar had been raised. Tenure in Yale’s English department had become 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. Or put another way, Kernan was moved up, but neither in nor out. And so he began his eleventh year on the Yale faculty as a “frozen” associate professor confronting what seemed to be the darkest hour of his career.

Kernan’s crisis of confidence proved short-lived. His initial response, he tells us, was to spend nights and weekends in his office in what initially 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 rereading those pieces, Kernan concluded they shared a common theme, and so he reworked 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 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-shaped room at the top of the graduate school, and the chairman, sitting at the open end, called on each professor in

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 on 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 lengthy, 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 here to preview my discussion. The first is that there is nothing quite like this passage in any of the now steadily growing number of memoirs written by other academics of Kernan's generation.¹¹ None of them, it seems, had to undergo a protracted tenure review process of the sort he experienced at Yale. The second point is that, if we strip Kernan's long passage of its irreverent tone, it gives us a fairly accurate account of Yale's complicated tenure review process in the mid-1960s. As we shall see, Yale's system for promotion was in fact "a very tricky affair," but it was also "very tricky" by design.

Today the standard phrase for Kernan's time as an untenured faculty member is "probationary period." And when the story of anxiety and hyperactivity comes to an end, it concludes neither with a sigh of relief, nor with Kernan proudly proclaiming 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 in the Yale English department in 1964–65. The first went to Harold Bloom, who was appointed instructor the year after Kernan arrived. He used an offer of a professorship from another university to obtain a continuous appointment and thereby was spared the long procedural wait that Kernan and three other colleagues—Thomas Greene, Richard Sylvester, and Harry Berger—had to endure. The remaining three continuous appointments had to be divided among these four, all

of whom the English department wanted to promote, and yet all of whom—like Kernan—happened to be Renaissance literary scholars. Final authority in the matter rested in the hands of Yale’s provost, Kernan tells us, who ruled it was not in Yale’s interest to promote all four. Remaining adamant in the face of persistent departmental lobbying, the provost 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 had the “golden fleece” in hand, this is all he 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 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. Kernan was never elected chair of Yale’s English department, but we learn a bit later in *In Plato’s Cave* 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, and he left Yale four years later to become dean of the Graduate School at Princeton.

Five Ways of Looking at What “Tenure” Does

Kernan was awarded tenure fifty years ago. His story, as I have said, helps us understand several issues that have to be addressed in answering the question “What has the word tenure been used to do over time?” The help it provides, however, turns out to be a bit complicated, mostly because it requires us to look closely at several problems with what he recalls about what happened to him on the road to tenure. Kernan’s tenure tale is long and rich with characters and incident. On first reading, it also seems both disillusioning and informative. But it does not take much digging in Yale’s history to discover that Kernan is not quite as savvy as he seems.¹² Consider his account of his delayed tenure decision in 1963–64. It leaves the impression that standards were changed on Kernan 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 a promotion to a continuous faculty appointment as associate professor would occur only if departments warranted that a promotion to full professor would soon be in the offing and if they 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, in other words, was not “publish or perish,” but more exactly: “publish one scholarly book (and have another on the way) or perish.” And this rule was also designed explicitly 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, then, in looking

back, he cannot bring himself to acknowledge that in giving him an extra year to finish a second book the department not only gave him a justifiable vote of confidence, but it also did itself a great favor.

This section will touch on other instances where Kernan failed to count his blessings. My aim here is not to take him to task for lacking twenty-twenty hindsight. Kernan has missed several important aspects of what he experienced on the road to tenure. But he did not miss all of them, and some certainly have not changed since his day. Solitude and uncertainty remain unavoidable aspects of a candidate's experience before a tenure decision. Today, as it was for Kernan fifty years ago, time spent on the road to a tenure decision—especially in the humanities—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 by working under the watchful eyes of sympathetic masters. Many of the feelings Kernan puts on display as he remembers working his way down an often lonely road—*anxiety, incredulity, injured pride, insecurity, disillusionment, and, above all, a grim determination not to fail*—also should be familiar to most who have followed him in more recent decades. That said, more important for my purposes are certain aspects of Kernan's life on the road to tenure that he has overlooked or forgotten. In particular, I want to show how his occasional blindness to his own good fortune inadvertently draws attention to some of the most important changes in what “tenure” has been doing over the course of the last fifty years. This section begins by underlining three that I suspect would stand out for other more recently tenured academics who come to Kernan's tenure tale, 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 “publish or perish” were among the rules that governed the lives of junior faculty at Yale in 1954. He also remembers that these two rules applied elsewhere and were “not new” (119). But his understanding of the facts is mistaken on both counts here. It is true 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 “up or out” came to describe a relatively uniform set of procedures observed by many American colleges and universities, although it seems very likely this was not before the late 1960s. Two surveys of the American academic workplace in the late 1950s showed that there was, in fact, nothing resembling a uniform set of tenure protocols. “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 colleges and universities 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 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 effort to establish carefully articulated and transparent tenure review procedures was designed primarily to keep promising young faculty in place.¹³

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. 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 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 it 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" to gain a permanent appointment that came without an elaborate internal tenure review of the sort Kernan had to endure.¹⁴

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 American institutions that had both an announced commitment to faculty research and scholarship and the institutional resources to support that commitment. In Kernan's case, Yale's resources included the Sterling Library (then the nation's fourth-largest, and its second-largest university library) and the Morse faculty fellowship program, which 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 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, and it is even harder to imagine that his research and publications would have flourished more somewhere else.¹⁵

What's more, in English departments at a vast majority of American colleges and universities during the 1950s and 1960s, there would have been little or 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 of a now largely forgotten study of English departments done in the late 1960s.¹⁶ In a nationwide sample of three hundred English departments at four-year institutions, this study showed that before 1968 neither the monograph nor any other publications were generally regarded as a principal requirement for tenure. When asked to list criteria for deciding tenure and promotion in order of importance, only 35.4 percent of the sampled English departments ranked scholarship of any kind, including the monograph, first or second. By contrast, the 2006 MLA report—which canvassed 1,339 language and literature departments in four-year, Carnegie doctorate-granting, master's and baccalaureate institutions in the continental United States—found that some forty years later almost 76 percent of respondents ranked publication as “very important” for earning tenure. It also discovered that the monograph has become increasingly important in comparison with other forms of scholarly publication. Almost 33 percent of all responding departments considered progress toward completion of a second book “important” or “very important.”¹⁷

What do these numbers tell us? For the authors of the 2006 MLA report, they show sweeping change in requirements for tenure and promotion, which they identify as “the rise of the tenure monograph.” Readers who come to the 2006 MLA report by way of a critical reading of Kernan's memoir would put things somewhat differently. For what the numbers also tell is that, however insistent and widespread application of the “publish a monograph or perish” rule may be in MLA disciplines at the moment, it also is a remarkably recent invention when it comes to tenure decisions at all but a small handful of American universities. The rule dates back only to the late 1960s, some three to four years after Kernan was awarded tenure at Yale.

And there is little mystery about why this is the case. The immediate impetus for change is another development that goes unmentioned in *In Plato's Cave*: 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 more and clearer evidence of scholarly promise. Or put another way, the “Darwinian” competition for a permanent faculty appointment that Kernan believes he joined when he was appointed a lecturer in Yale's English department in the fall of 1954 really did not begin to set in until the last year of his service as Yale's associate provost in the fall of 1969. Before that time, at most American colleges and universities, both tenure-track jobs and tenured positions were relatively low-hanging fruit. Kernan did have good reason to sweat getting tenure at Yale, as we shall see. 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 today are more rational today than they were fifty years ago, or whether both are equally strange, there is no question that procedures Yale followed in hiring Alvin Kernan in 1954, such as they were, bear little resemblance to current practice. Kernan is right to call attention to the fact that his years as a graduate student and untenured faculty member 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 of long-standing anti-Jewish barriers to both faculty and students.¹⁸ Yale's effort to transform itself into a truly national institution was in its early stages when Kernan was hired, however, and it did not entail a clean and sudden break with all of the central practices of the old boy system.¹⁹ When Kernan began his career, the professional academic career structure in the United States remained much as it had been 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 usually depended on personal contacts, and even the most distinguished of American universities chose to grow their faculty largely from within by hiring their most promising graduate students and publishing their first books.²⁰ As late as 1960, in fact, almost half the Yale faculty was comprised of Yale graduates. Whether he knew it or not, Kernan benefited from this arrangement. When he was awarded tenure in 1965, all five candidates for the four tenured openings in English had Yale PhDs; three also had Yale BAs.²¹

How have university hiring practices changed during the last four decades? Many answers come to mind. Certainly one is that, in some very important respects, the buyer's market has changed things for the better. For while the coming of the buyer's market has made competition for tenure-track jobs fiercely competitive, it also has helped—as the 2006 MLA report mentions 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.²² Today, at Yale and elsewhere, hiring for tenure-track positions in MLA disciplines is a protracted undertaking carried out with established rules and principles. Once a requested appointment is approved, an official announcement usually is placed in the fall issue of *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 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 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, candidates on an initial “short” list—including typically twelve to fifteen names—

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 list of final candidates and waits to see which accept official job offers.²³ 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.²⁴

So far I have been retelling Kernan's tenure tale to examine what I see as three answers to the question of what "tenure" did for him during the first phase of his career at Yale. Its first service was to specify a timetable and decision rule for considering his promotion to a continuous appointment; the second was to identify professional standards that were brought to bear in making a final decision about such an appointment; and the third was to identify those who had authority to make that decision. Each of these services could also be described as a rule or principle that Yale observed in making continuous faculty appointments in the mid-1960s, and at least two things can be said about them taken as a group. The first is that I suspect Kernan, if asked, would agree 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 decision-making protocols, they could hardly be considered universal or timeless. Not only was Kernan's road to tenure not quite as mysterious 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 other protocols Yale observed in Kernan's case that more closely resemble current practice.

4. The Complexity of the Tenure Revue Process

In numbering himself among the "lucky," I do not think Kernan means to suggest that Yale's decision to award him tenure was somehow accidental or uncaused. Even so, it is hard to explain why he views the process Yale observed in making that decision with such incredulity. "Academics hate to make final decisions like awarding tenure," writes Kernan, and "strange things happen when they are forced to do so" (131). Fair enough. But if that is his basic belief, it does not apply to his own case. More significant, 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 have presented Yale's multilevel process in a considerably more positive light.

Here again the 1969 survey of English departments cited in the MLA report provides important information about an American academic landscape considerably more complicated than Kernan managed to

reconstruct. According to that survey, during the years of Kernan's 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 department chair. In 42.8 percent of the departments surveyed in 1969, tenure decisions were made by the chair alone; in 21 percent, tenure decisions were made by the chair and an advisory committee appointed by him (or, very rarely, her). Not surprisingly, the 1969 survey's findings about promotion after tenure matched those for tenure. In 44.6 percent of the departments, decisions about promotion were made by the chair alone; in 22.7 percent, they were made by the chair and a chair-appointed committee.

These data describe some of the key points of an almost entirely male patronage system that dated back to the first decade of the twentieth century. By Kernan's own account, Yale's tenure review process in the mid-1960s clearly was something substantially different. But what exactly made it different? The answer emerges from a much closer look at the long passage above in which Kernan recounts his own tenure decision and from some additional digging into Yale's history.

If we strip that passage of its irreverent tone and rewrite it to make it sound something like what one might in encounter in a current faculty handbook, it 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 is called on to give an opinion of the candidate. After all views are heard, a vote is taken, also in turn and by voice ballot. If the department's verdict is negative, the department chair notifies the candidate immediately; if positive, the Chair forwards 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 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 is 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 notifies the candidate of the Board's decision.

The point of this rewriting is not simply to offer a sympathetic restatement of Yale's tenure review process in the mid-1960s. It also shows how Kernan himself has drawn attention to several broad features of a process that once was distinctive to Yale but in recent decades has become standard practice across the country. These include the fact that today the tenure review process typically consists of a sequence of stages, beginning with deliberations in a tenure candidate's department and progressing through several higher levels of institutional authority; that a candidate's qualifications are reviewed and evaluated at each stage; that the multilevel process is by design complex and thorough; and that as a result 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: it provided a complex set of protocols that guided the decisions of those who actually voted on his permanent appointment to the faculty.

But what explains the distinctive 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 1964–65, in an effort to achieve greater scholarly "critical mass" in its academic departments, Yale grew its total faculty by 25 percent and increased tenured faculty appointments in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences from 41 percent to 51 percent. Between 1963 and 1968, it increased its tenure-track and tenured faculty by 80 percent. These numbers tell of a substantial building up of Yale's faculty during the late 1950s and 1960s. But as Geoffrey Kabaservice has pointed out, that faculty 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 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 passage loosely names some of the parties who figured in the reorganization. But it barely hints at the purpose of the change 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 (BPOs) that then

governed Yale College and the Graduate School, respectively. (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 also 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 the Joint Meeting of the two BPOs. Three and eventually four such committees were established for tenured appointments in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences—the last of 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, and as a result 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, another new decision rule was created: permanent appointments at Yale were to be made only when there was a substantial consensus at all levels of the process.

Yale's tenure review process in the mid-1960s was complicated and cumbersome. No one reading this description of that process, however, should have much trouble grasping that its immediate intent was to meld faculty appointment and promotion procedures at Yale College and the Graduate School. Understanding its broader purposes, however, requires a final excursion into Yale's history. Compared to the nation's other leading research universities, Yale in the 1950s certainly was 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, the college's standards for faculty appointments also had prized teaching ability and the collegial reliability of "Yale men" over research and scholarship. The Graduate School, which had responsibility for all nonprofessional advanced degrees and some master's degrees with designation, reserved its faculty appointments only for research scholars of proven ability. 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 also 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 important, during years that saw other leading research universities embrace unprecedented new opportunities for scientific research provided by federal grants and the growth of "big science," Yale remained strikingly weak in the sciences. This weakness was exacerbated by another archaic feature of Yale's organization: the division between Yale College and the Sheffield Scientific School. This arrangement had 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.

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, Kingman Brewster's 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 in America was dawning, Yale faced serious difficulties in both recruiting and retaining top scientists. In fact, by today's standards, it could hardly have been described as a major international research university.

Soon after Kingman 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 of these grew out of his sympathy toward 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. (Over the course of Kernan's eleven-

year probationary period, federal research money increased from 4.6% of Yale's budget to 22.9%.) The new committee-based tenure review system Brewster helped to fashion as provost directly complemented this strategy. Its target, however, was the Faculty of Arts and Sciences taken as a whole. At the heart of Brewster's new system was a vision of Yale as an academic meritocracy. Faculty merit now would not only be more consistently defined across departments but it would also be more consistently identified as a matter of a candidate's international standing among his professional peers. In other words, Yale was no longer in the business of training its own closely knit faculty; it was intent on claiming its place among the world's top research universities. The results were quick. In the early years, Graduate School dean John Perry Miller estimated that each of the 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 tenure-track faculty appointments were likely to be promoted to permanent appointments.²⁵

Indeed, Alvin Kernan had good reason to sweat getting tenure at Yale. But it was for reasons he barely understood.

5. Tenure, Academic Freedom, and Time

From the vantage point of contemporary believers in tenure, perhaps the most striking aspect of Kernan's tale may be that "academic freedom" never finds its way onto the list of his hopes, fears, and reasons to worry about or want tenure. 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 only one episode from the McCarthy era—the controversy that followed publication of William F. Buckley Jr.'s tract *God and Man at Yale*—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 routinely present professors as people who potentially have something controversial or unpopular to say, and who thus deserve protection from those who might take offense. Kernan never says directly why he wanted tenure.²⁶ 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 Yale's tenure review process 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. When Kernan was awarded tenure at the relatively

advanced age of forty-one, he was in many perhaps obvious ways not the same person he was at thirty. When he arrived at Yale in 1954, Kernan had barely finished his dissertation and had only one year of teaching experience. Given the high stakes, it is tempting to say that in 1954 he pursued 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 the exactly biggest prize any professional academic hopes for over the course of a career, but certainly a prize Kernan needed to make such a career possible. Yet it took him eleven years to climb the American academic equivalent of Everest, and when the moment came for the final successful ascent to the summit, it seemed beside the point. By 1965 Kernan had scaled several other formidable academic mountains, and over time his various successes had firmly established his reputation as an outstanding teacher and scholar. Yale's decision to award Kernan tenure, then, was hardly a decision at all, let alone an achievement Kernan could readily identify as his own. It was more a belated act of institutional recognition or validation. Little wonder, then, that the actual award of tenure turned out to be a fleeting pleasure.

Another, perhaps more significant lesson Kernan may have learned about the relationship between time and tenure emerged from the fact that, when the moment finally came for his tenure decision, Yale did not have tenure openings available for all qualified candidates, and it made no apology for the shortage. Funds were not unlimited, after all. More significant, "tenure" at Yale in the mid-1960s was no longer considered a due reward for past institutional services, no matter how valuable. Or put another way, if one of the things "tenure" at Yale did for Kernan was to compel the university to define and observe a set of meritocratic principles in making continuous faculty appointments, simply giving one's time in service to Yale was not viewed as unique among the ways of acquiring merit. Only candidates for tenure who proved to be scholars of exceptional distinction and promise were invited to stay.

What Is Tenure? What Can We Learn from the History of Tenure?

By way of a conclusion, I want to define tenure and offer some thoughts on what rigorous historical investigation might contribute to fashioning a "logical definition and defense of tenure." I take it there is no grasping tenure simply as a concept.²⁷ Tenure is better understood (1) as a practice defined by (2) a set of protocols that (3) have been created and elaborated over time to assure (4) professional academics' continued involvement in defining the academic mission of colleges and university and to assure that (5) colleges and universities observe procedural due process (6) in making faculty appointments ("tenure-track" appointments) that may lead to continuous appointment, (7) as promoting or dismissing faculty who are eligible for continuous appointments, and (8) as dismissing faculty who have been awarded continuous appointments.

This definition admittedly is cumbersome, but so too is the current American practice of tenure. I also believe everything that “tenure” does, every practical effect it has both on the careers of individual professional academics and on the day-to-day operations of American colleges and universities grows out of what strike me as these eight incontestable facts about tenure.

This definition underscores three important facts. The first is that *the meaning of tenure can change according to the context*. For individual professional academics, “tenure” unavoidably means different things at different points in the course of their 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 tenure.²⁸ It also made him one of the resident agents of tenure. Central to the modern American tenure review process is the presumption that already-tenured faculty, who have weathered the same process, are the people most competent to assess the 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 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 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 lack of it), 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. Put another way, if the whole point of “tenure” is to help individual colleges and universities recruit, evaluate, and reward faculty according to what the institutions 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 to be their fundamental purposes.

In this perspective, I take it there is nothing inevitable about current due process protocols 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 percent success rate in MLA disciplines between 1994–95 and 2003–4? And, for that matter, 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 something of a foregone conclusion? Tenure decisions in MLA disciplines today, in effect, seem to be 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?²⁹

The fact my definition underlines that most interests me is that tenure is a 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 retelling of Alvin Kernan’s tenure tale. The first is a need to make a sharp distinction between “tenure” as a safeguard for academic freedom and “tenure” as a complex set of protocols institutions choose to observe in awarding permanent faculty appointments. Those who define academic freedom simply as scholarly independence and 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 twofold. First, it does little to explain the protocols that actually guide decisions in making continuous faculty appointments. It also does not help to sort out the tangled history of these protocols. The little we know about tenure reform in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, tells us it had almost nothing to do with safeguarding scholarly independence. Tenure reform was instead a matter of quality control—or, more precisely, of ambitious and remarkably powerful presidents and senior academic administrators like Kingman Brewster overturning arbitrary and haphazard appointment practices of tenured senior faculty and creating a meritocracy based on open and rigorous competition for jobs and a tenure review process in which the concept of faculty merit was regrounded primarily in research and published scholarship.³⁰

When we see that tenure has a history we understand that recounting its past involves more than 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 have changed over time. When Kernan started teaching at Yale in 1954, authority for tenure decisions at almost all American colleges and universities lay entirely in the hands of boards of trustees, presidents, senior academic administrators, and department chairs. Only in the last 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 also 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 members' talent chiefly as a matter of specialized research and published scholarship widely perceived as outstanding by their disciplinary peers. The means have changed, too. Fifty years ago, there was nothing resembling a standard tenure review process, let alone a consensus regarding specific criteria for acquiring, denying, or terminating continuous faculty appointments. As a result, American colleges and universities routinely awarded and denied continuous faculty appointments with little regard for due process. Most tenure decisions were essentially in-house affairs, decisions in which ability certainly mattered, but local traditions and practices mattered even more.

Bringing “the history of tenure” into the light of day sounds like a major undertaking, and it is. Certainly anyone 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, a set of procedural guidelines for faculty hiring, promotion, and dismissal—the most striking thing about “tenure” at the moment is that we have little resembling a rigorous and systematic history of its development over time. The truth is that standardization of the tenure review process is essentially what “the history of tenure” was all about in the last quarter 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 book-length scholarly studies that attempt to tell the story of how today’s standard review process came into being or to account for the distinctive ideas that now inform the American practice of awarding continuous faculty appointments. With a bare handful of exceptions, the same is true for the tenure review process at the level of individual colleges and universities. At best, the practice of tenure as a means of quality control is touched on only in passing in existing institutional histories.³¹ Little wonder, then, that Alvin Kernan’s tenure tale needed extensive amending. Like the rest of us, when it comes to the actual history of tenure, he had little to draw on but memories. Memories are important tools in reconstructing that history, but they are not always reliable ones.

Consider a final puzzle—which bears more on defending tenure than defining it—that arises if we again set Kernan’s memoir side-by-side with the 2006 MLA report and compare what they tell us about what happened to “tenure” during the last decades of the twentieth century. When comparing what they have to say, I am reminded (by way of Kirk Varnedoe) of what Kenneth Clark once called “the Rembrandt conundrum.” For Clark, Rembrandt was a paradigmatic instance of a puzzle that confronts all serious

students of intellectual and cultural history. How do we account for achievements and practices many now consider timeless but we know must nevertheless be a part—or, paradoxically, not a part—of the era in which they were produced and first appeared? Or as Clark put the problem more bluntly in Rembrandt’s case: Consider the inhabitants of seventeenth-century Amsterdam, “the first center of bourgeois capitalism”—crass, mercantile, money-grubbing, and philistine—and what did they get? They got Rembrandt.³²

It may be stretching things to compare the work of hiring and promoting modern university faculty with great painting, but if one allows for the comparison, the last thing I would say about the American practice of tenure in the final decades of the twentieth century is that the reverse, or inverse, seems to be true. Call it the “Conundrum of Increasingly Uniform Standards.” At the outset of *In Plato’s Cave*, Kernan reminds us that these were decades when the number of accredited institutions of American higher education increased from 2,000 to 3,500; student enrollment soared from 3.5 million to 12.25 million, with women’s share of the total increasing from 37 percent to 55.5 percent, and minorities from 12 percent to 25 percent. It was era that saw not only a vast popularization of American higher education, but also a broadening of the definition of the kind of knowledge colleges and universities should teach and produce. And in this provocative and challenging new world, what did we get in the way of “tenure”? We got thousands of young Alvin Kernans. Or more precisely, in MLA disciplines at more and more American colleges and universities, we got protocols and standards for hiring and promotion designed essentially to produce replicas of the young Alvin Kernan, almost all of whom also were also made to work on a considerably shorter timetable.

The numbers in the 2006 MLA report bear repeating here. In a survey of 1,339 MLA departments at 734 institutions, the percentage of departments ranking scholarship of primary importance (above teaching) more than doubled—from 35.4 percent to 75.7 percent—during the last decades of the twentieth century. Almost 33 percent of the 1,339 surveyed MLA departments now expect what only Yale and a small handful of the nation’s leading research universities expected of tenure-track faculty in their English departments forty years ago: demonstrated progress toward a second book, but again on a much tighter timetable.³³

The full story of what has happened to “tenure” is, of course, a bit more complicated than this. As the 2006 MLA report notes in passing, an academic practice that for decades had disturbingly few procedures for accountability has been replaced by a new system of “bureaucratic equity” whose “core principle” is that “all personnel actions are to enact . . . institutional rules and procedures rather than personal inclinations and biases” (30). At first glance, the belated arrival of procedural due process in the realms of hiring and promotion seems cause for unqualified celebration. But, as the 2006 MLA report goes on to document in some detail, standards for tenure at institutions across the country haven’t simply become fairer and more transparent, they also have become strikingly more uniform. And herein lies my final puzzle. During a time when the student population served by American colleges and universities became more diverse, and when the

social purposes served by these institutions also became more varied, MLA disciplines at hundreds of institutions—and it is worth emphasizing that they now include traditional liberal arts colleges and master’s universities as well as research universities—not only adopted a one-size-fits-all model of tenure, but they also adopted the model of a specialized research scholar as the only one deserving a continuous appointment. Or put another way, in the face a quiet revolution that made American higher education into an increasingly complicated mass system, we got a vision of tenure that predated the revolution, and yet which in that earlier era was operative only at research universities at the very top of the food chain.

Among those who want to defend tenure, not many have asked, “Why has there come to be so little variation when it comes to protocols and expectations for tenure?” “Why has the model of a specialized research professor become the dominant model of a tenured American professor?” “Why do we need so many young Alvin Kernans?” These are fair questions, and certainly not ones a historian can avoid. In a world where higher education now happens in several ways and serves many different purposes, why are there not more roads to, and more reasons for, continuous faculty appointments? Surely we live in a time where there are new things for “tenure” to do.

Early drafts of this essay were read and improved by W.B. Carnochan, Gary Hamburg, Geoffrey Harpham, David Hollinger, and Thomas Volet.

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Notes

- 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 Combined 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).
- ³ There is some hard information on what currently counts as a standard tenure review process. In a recent survey of 1,380 US four-year institutions, stratified by Carnegie classification, Cathy Trower has 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 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 than 10 percent 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 closely 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, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 32–68. Perhaps 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 has uncovered little about standard criteria for promotion to a permanent faculty appointment.

- ⁴ In this essay, I use “procedural due process” in the usual sense to refer to a course of formal proceedings carried out in accordance with established rules and principles. I also take it that no particular set of rules or principles follows naturally out of a commitment to procedural due process.
- ⁵ A somewhat larger number of doctoral recipients in MLA disciplines (more than 40 percent) never obtained tenure-track appointments. If one also factors faculty hired to tenure-track positions who left before they come up for tenure decisions (well over 20 percent) it turns out that between 1994–95 and 2003–4 the chance of earning a continuous faculty appointment in MLA disciplines was only about 35 percent.
- ⁶ “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 elaborate and time-consuming 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 usually is explained in a paragraph or two; descriptions of the tenure review process typically take up several pages.
- ⁷ Alvin Kernan, *In Plato’s Cave* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. I am aware that mining a memoir is not the equivalent of systematic historical reconstruction. Nonetheless, memoirs are important tools for a historian of tenure because they remind us that individual professional scholars remain fundamental units in the practice of tenure. On the challenges that memoirs pose for historians, see Paula S. Fass, “The Memoir Problem,” *Reviews in American History* 34 (2006): 107–23.
- ⁸ At the time Kernan published *In Plato’s Cave*, 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.
- ⁹ “The Savage Eye,” *TLJ*, July 8, 1960, 432.
- ¹⁰ Another way of putting this would be to say that the first truth Kernan learned about the modern American practice of tenure is that it requires tenure-track faculty to coexist with already tenured faculty; the second is that they can only coexist for so long. Such coexistence 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.
- ¹¹ A miniboom of academic memoirs has been underway for almost three 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, MN: Graywolf, 1995); Paul Fussell, *Doing Battle: The Making of a Sceptic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), chaps. vi–ix; W. B. Carnochan, *Momentary Bliss: An American Memoir* (Stanford University Libraries, 1999); Richard Pipes, *VIXI: Memoirs of a Non-belonger* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press); John Morton Blum, *A Life with History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Forrest MacDonald, *Recovering the Past* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); and Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar’s Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). If mentioned at all, tenure decisions in all of these memoirs are noted only in passing, typically in 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 fifty-one of the three hundred pages of *In Plato’s Cave*.
- ¹² My account of Yale’s history draws from Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974); Roger L. Geiger, *To Advance Knowledge: The Growth of the American Research University, 1900–1940* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1986); Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Universities since World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993); 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).
- ¹³ 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, NY: 1959), 132–47. Some readers may wonder why

the now canonical 1940 AAUP *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* does not figure in my discussion here. The answer is that the AAUP's principles did not speak to "tenure" understood as a means of quality control. The 1940 AAUP statement did recommend a probationary period (not to exceed seven years) for beginning full-time faculty, but its recommended decision rule was "in or out," not "up or out." Here is the relevant language: "After an expiration of a probationary period, teachers and investigators should have permanent or continuous appointments, and their service shall be terminated only for adequate cause, except in the case of retirement for age, or under extraordinary circumstances because of financial exigency." The 1940 AAUP statement did not go on to explain why teachers and instructors "should have" continuous appointments, apart from time spent in service to the institution during the probationary period. Nor did it recommend that continuous appointments be conditional on promotion. The AAUP apparently had no quarrel with the prospect of some "teachers and investigators" spending their entire careers as lecturers or assistant professors, so long as at a fixed moment in time they were given assurances they would not be dismissed without cause. It is also worth noting that institutional endorsements of the 1940 AAUP *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* were slow in coming, and when they did begin to come in significant numbers in the 1950s, they came from professional academic associations, not from the governing boards of American colleges and universities.

- ¹⁴ As Roger Geiger points out, the effect of "outside calls" depended on the relative standing of the employing institution and the one issuing the call. (Kernan does not name the source of Harold Bloom's offer.) In the 1920s and 1930s, academically weaker institutions ordinarily did not match outside offers. Geiger, *To Advance Knowledge*, 315n39.
- ¹⁵ 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. The arrangement, unthinkable today, goes unmentioned in *In Plato's Cave*. The readers are named in Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire and the English Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), ix.
- ¹⁶ Thomas W. Wilcox, *The Anatomy of College English* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973).
- ¹⁷ These numbers can be broken down another way. 44.4 percent of the 446 Carnegie master's and 48 percent of the 225 Carnegie baccalaureate institutions who responded to the 2006 MLA survey now rank publication of a monograph as "very important" or "important." Almost 50 percent of the 156 Carnegie doctorate institutions now demand what only Yale and a small handful of other universities required roughly fifty years ago: demonstrated progress toward a second scholarly book.
- ¹⁸ 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, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 261–68, 326.
- ¹⁹ John Morton Blum recalls that when he traveled to Yale in April 1957 to discuss details of the offer of a permanent appointment, he learned that not only would the senior (and then almost entirely Protestant) professors of Yale College have to approve his appointment, they also wanted "recommendations from *bona fide* college alumni." Blum, *Life with History*, 136–38. Blum acknowledges that some measure of anti-Semitism continued to affect senior Yale faculty in the late 1950s, but he 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.
- ²⁰ 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, *Scholar's Tale*, 15, 29.
- ²¹ It is worth noting that several Jews hired to tenured positions in the English department at Yale in the 1960s—among them Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Donald Hirsch, and Harry Berger—also received their PhDs from Yale.
- ²² Another much less welcome consequence 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 of full-time faculty in MLA disciplines. But there is a perhaps cruel irony here. For while the “feminization” of MLA disciplines is another development that swept away the old boy system, it also has helped to sustain the oversupply of academic labor.

- ²³ My account of a typical MLA disciplinary search borrows from Pritchard, *English Papers*, 107.
- ²⁴ One also would never guess in reading *In Plato's Cave* that, when Kernan 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 6,500 in 1950; 11,600 in 1960; and almost 21,000 in 1965, the year Kernan was awarded tenure.
- ²⁵ *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Policies and Procedures for Tenure Appointments* (Yale University, 1965), 28. My account of the workings of Yale's tenure review process in the mid-1960s draws mostly from John Perry Miller, *Creative Academic Settings: High Craft and Low Cunning* (New Haven, CT: J. S. Meon, 1991).
- ²⁶ 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 had helped to lay the groundwork for that life by giving him a mortgage for a eleven-room brick house outside of New Haven.
- ²⁷ By this I do not mean that “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.
- ²⁸ Specific protections and privileges of tenure typically include (a) continuous appointment as associate or full professor 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; and (c) continued institutional support for teaching and scholarship.
- ²⁹ In explaining the strict “up or out” rule that dismisses tenure-track faculty who have not proven their teaching and research capabilities during the probationary period, Cary Nelson observes that the rule “does occasionally overlook late bloomers, but that is finally a price we must pay for tenure's benefits.” See Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt, *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary of Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 294. Given the findings of the 2006 MLA report, it would seem more accurate to say that, at the moment, at a vast majority of institutions, the price of enforcing the “up or out” rule is only “rarely,” not “occasionally,” paid. 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 at all but the most elite institutions, the answer is very probably not. Of ninety-five tenure files reviewed from across the system, 95 percent resulted in tenure appointments. *Independent Report on Tenure-Related Processes at the University of Colorado*, April 24, 2006, 16.
- ³⁰ In addition to Kingman Brewster, the list of ambitious (and often autocratic) postwar presidents bent on tenure reform would include Clark Kerr (California) and Abram Sachar (Brandeis).
- ³¹ But see Ted I. K. Youn and Tanya M. Price, “Learning from the Experience of Others: The Evolution of Faculty Tenure and Promotion Rules in Comprehensive Universities,” *Journal of Higher Education*, March/April 2009, 204–37. This essay provides a focused study of recent changes in rules for tenure at some six hundred American universities that provide courses in various professional subjects and the liberal arts but do not offer a degree higher than the master's. Youn and Price argue that, from 1980s onward, as these “ugly ducklings of higher education” sought greater national recognition and status, they shifted their emphasis for assessing candidates for tenure and promotion from teaching to research and publications. Most commonly, the shift was driven largely by administrators and faculty members who had moved or been recruited to comprehensive universities from nearby (and more selective) research universities and liberal arts colleges. To date, I have found only two articles that 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, NY: Union College Press, 2003), 720–23, and Caitlin Rosenthal, “Fundamental Freedom or Fringe Benefit? Rice University and the Administrative History of Tenure, 1935–1962,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* (2011), <http://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/files/JAF/2011%20JAF/Rosenthal.pdf>. Among Somers's most interesting findings is that until sometime in the late 1950s, Union's president made all tenure decisions, as well as all salary and promotion decisions, without formal consultation, hearings, or guidelines. From Rosenthal, we learn that Rice University first adopted an official tenure policy in May 1962. Before then, its Board of Trustees maintained power to remove at will even full professors. In practice, however, Rice

faculty enjoyed a system of de facto or informal tenure. Before 1962 faculty members at Rice 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.

³² Kenneth Clark, *Civilization: A Personal View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 201–7; Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 94–95.

³³ It is worth noting that the 2006 MLA report does not call for a systematic rethinking of the protocols of the standard tenure review process. Nor does it question the primacy of research and scholarship in tenure decisions. It argues only that such decisions should take more sympathetic account of the full range of “scholarly activity” in which faculty currently engage. The primacy of scholarship in an age of mass higher education, in other words, goes unquestioned.