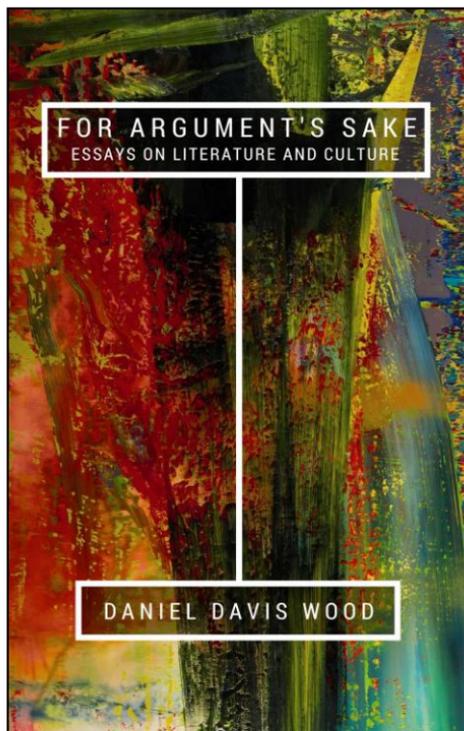


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 225-231.

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SPEECH AND *STONER*

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ENTHUSIASTIC APPRECIATIONS OF JOHN WILLIAMS' *STONER* HAVE been floating around on the Internet ever since the novel's republication by NYRB Classics in 2006, but another voice in praise of it can't hurt. *Stoner* is a masterpiece. There's no use festooning it with superlatives. They can't convey how great it is. Read it!

More than its perfect prose, tone, characterisation, and narrative momentum, what impressed me about *Stoner* was the subtlety of its self-awareness. I expected a reprise of the startling but unwavering realism of Williams' previous novel, *Butcher's Crossing*, which is arguably one of the half-dozen or so truly outstanding New Westerns and which offered me my first glimpse of Williams' talents. What I found instead was a work of literature that acknowledged and justified its own literariness right from the very first page, and continued to do so throughout:

William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910. ... Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. This manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: 'Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues.'

An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual question. Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound

which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers. (3-4)

That's how the novel opens. Straightaway it marks out its literary territory. On the one hand, by noting the inadequacy of the sole surviving written record of the life of William Stoner, it implies that what is required is something like itself: an account of Stoner's life that is both more elaborate and more specific than what currently exists. On the other hand, by noting the "casual" questioning of Stoner's life and the variations in the verbal accounts offered in response, it implies also that what is required is not only a more elaborate and specific account but, crucially, a written one. What *Stoner* wants, from its very first page, is an account of Stoner's life that becomes more elaborate and specific the more it both supersedes the inadequate written record in the University of Missouri library and militates against the transience and ambiguities of speech as an alternative means of superseding that record. Time and again throughout *Stoner*, as the novel goes about setting the record straight, it casts speech as an act through which its task might be accomplished if only speech was not so capable of misdirection via rhetorical seduction, distraction, and outright deception.

Here, for instance, is the young Stoner's academic adviser, Archer Sloane, whose speech mannerisms seduce Stoner into devoting himself to the study of literature:

The instructor was a man of middle age, in his early fifties; his name was Archer Sloane, and he came to his task of teaching with a seeming disdain and contempt, as if he perceived between his knowledge and what he could say a gulf so profound that he would make no effort to dose it. ... His voice was flat and dry, and it came through barely moving lips without expression or intonation; but his long thin fingers moved with grace and persuasion, as if giving to the words a shape that his voice could not. (10)

And here is Stoner's first contact with the woman who will become his loveless wife — who will eventually do everything in her power to ruin him — as she, too, seduces him with words, and less with the words she actually speaks than with the simple act of speaking:

Stoner had turned back when she began to speak, and he looked at her with an amazement that did not show on his face. Her eyes were fixed straight before her, her face was blank, and her lips moved as if, without understanding, she read from an invisible book. He walked slowly across the room and sat down beside her. She did not seem to notice him; her eyes remained fixed straight ahead, and she continued to tell him about herself, as he had asked her to do. ... And [later] something unsuspected within her, some instinct, made her call him back when he started to go out the door, made her speak quickly and desperately, as she had never spoken before, and as she would never speak again. (55)

And here is Stoner's first in-depth encounter with Charles Walker, the arrogant student who will destroy Stoner's professional life just as Stoner's wife destroys his life at home:

[Walker's] voice rose and fell, his right hand went out with its fingers curled supplicatingly upward, and his body swayed to the rhythm of his words; his eyes rolled slightly upward, as if he were making an invocation. ... Walker's voice dropped to a conversational level, and he addressed the back wall of the room in a tone that was calm and equable with reason. ...

Anger, simple and dull, rose within Stoner [when he realised the extent of Walker's intellectual vapidness], overwhelming the complexity of feeling he had had at the beginning of the paper. His immediate impulse was to rise, to cut short the farce that was developing; he knew that if he did not stop Walker at once he would have to let him go on for as long as he wanted to talk. ... He had waited too long to interrupt, and Walker was rushing impetuously through what he had to say. ...

After he became used to his anger Stoner found a reluctant and perverse admiration stealing over him. However florid and

imprecise, the man's powers of rhetoric and invention were dismayingly impressive [and] Stoner became aware that he was in the presence of a bluff so colossal that he had no ready means of dealing with it. (141-143)

And here is Walker again, delivering a presentation followed by a question and answer session that has been scripted by his supervisor, Hollis Lomax, precisely in order to distract Walker's listeners from noticing his limited intellectual capabilities:

Walker's presentation was lucid, forthright, and intelligent; at times it was almost brilliant. Lomax was right; if the dissertation fulfilled its promise, it would be brilliant. Hope, warm and exhilarating, rushed upon [Stoner], and he leaned forward attentively.

Walker talked upon the subject of his dissertation for perhaps ten minutes and then abruptly stopped. Quickly Lomax asked another question, and Walker responded at once. ... Walker's voice continued, fluent and sure of itself, the words emerging from his rapidly moving mouth almost as if — Stoner started, and the hope that had begun in him died as abruptly as it had been born. ... Lomax finished his questioning, and Holland began. It was, Stoner admitted, a masterful performance; unobtrusively, with great charm and good humor, Lomax managed it all. ... He rephrased [other listeners'] questions... changing them so that the original intent was lost in the elucidation. He engaged Walker in what seemed to be elaborately theoretical arguments, although he did most of the talking. And finally... he cut into [other listeners'] questions with questions of his own that led Walker where he wanted him to go.

During this time Stoner did not speak. He listened to the talk that swirled around him. ... He was waiting to do what he knew he had to do, and he was waiting with a dread and an anger and a sorrow that grew more intense with every minute that passed. (154-157)

At one point, when Lomax threatens to charge Stoner with professional misconduct and construes actual events in a way that makes

them appear sinister, Stoner cries out: "How you make it sound! Sure, everything you say is fact, but none of it is true. Not the way you say it" (170). And later, when Stoner's retirement dinner offers him an opportunity to publicly construe events however he pleases, he is rendered powerless by his inability to speak:

As the applause dwindled someone in the audience shouted in a thin voice: 'Speech!' Someone else took up the call, and the word was murmured here and there. ...

[Stoner] got to his feet, and realized that he had nothing to say. He was silent for a long time as he looked from face to face. He heard his voice issue flatly. 'I have taught...' he said. He began again. 'I have taught at this University for nearly forty years. I do not know what I would have done if I had not been a teacher. If I had not taught, I might have—' He paused, as if distracted. Then he said, with a finality, 'I want to thank you all for letting me teach.' (265-266)

And finally, at the end of his life, Stoner receives news of Katherine Driscoll, the colleague and lover he was forced to abandon when their affair jeopardised both of their careers, and this last encounter with Katherine affirms the strength of the written word:

In the early spring of 1949 he received a circular from the press of a large eastern university; it announced the publication of Katherine's book, and gave a few words about the author. ... He got a copy of the book as soon as he could. When he held it in his hands his fingers seemed to come alive; they trembled so that he could scarcely open it. He turned the first few pages and saw the dedication: "To W.S."

His eyes blurred, and for a long time he sat without moving. Then he shook his head, returned to the book, and did not put it down until he had read it through. ... The prose was graceful, and its passion was masked by a coolness and darity of intelligence. It was herself he saw in what he read, he realized; and he marveled at how truly he could see her even now. (249-250)

Whether or not he can *truly* see her is, of course, an open question, and is just one aspect of the broader question of whether or not the written word is in fact more capable than speech of conveying the truth of a human life via the elaboration and specification of circumstantial detail. But with its continual ambivalence towards speech, *Stoner* seems to me to close off that broad open question in favour of the written word and thus in favour of richly detailed humanist realism as the literary mode best suited to its purposes — although, unusually for that sort of realism, it senses its own lack of intrinsic authority and works hard to accrue and justify it.

Works Cited

Williams, John. *Butcher's Crossing*. 1960. New York: NYRB Classics, 2007. Print.

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