

Seeing through illusion: Needed: graduates with critical minds

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

I am an avid reader of graduation speeches. A graduation speaker must convey an idea under difficult conditions and in a short time—an almost impossible challenge. So I am fascinated when I find a speech that works. This year's best speech had this title: "What are you going to do with that?" The question could apply to any degree, but Mark Danner was speaking to graduating students of English at the University of California at Berkeley.

This is the class that entered college in September 2001. As the world was falling apart, these students went to their moms and dads and announced, "Folks, I am going to major in English." How could Mom and Dad respond to such an impractical choice at a time when practicality was at a high premium?

Mark Danner had a response:

To be an English major is to live not only by questioning, but by being questioned. It is to live with a question mark placed squarely on your forehead. It is to live, at least some of the time, in a state of "existential dread." . . . It means not only to see clearly the surface of things and to see beyond those surfaces, but to place oneself in opposition, however subtle, an opposition that society seldom lets you forget: What are you going to do with that?

Danner, who teaches journalism at Berkeley and Bard College, writes for the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*. He chose a career in journalism and writing "in part because I found that yawning difference between what I was told and what I could see to be inescapable." His most recent book is *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror*. (The text of his graduation speech is in the June 23 *New York Review of Books*.)

I read Danner's speech as I was studying Luchino Visconti's 1963 film *The Leopard*. In his most significant role, Burt Lancaster plays the 19th-century Sicilian prince Don Fabrizio, who observes the society around him with a critical eye, cultivating what Danner might call a "subtle opposition."

Visconti's film won the main award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1963, but it suffered from severe editing in its American version and was largely dismissed by critics and the public as too confusing (all that Italian history) and too slow (all those nobles dancing and reflecting on trivia in the midst of a revolution).

The film's longer Italian version was reissued in 1983, and while it will never attract a wide audience, most critics accept it as a magnificent film that is as relevant and insightful for today's politics as any of the great novels studied by the graduates who heard Danner's speech at Berkeley. In fact, those are the students who ought now to be mindful enough—as opposed to mindless about such works of art—to grasp the vision of both the original novel and Visconti's film.

Adapted from Giuseppe di Lampedusa's 1958 novel, *The Leopard* focuses on the beginning of Italy's Risorgimento (resurgence) period (1860-1862), when the modern state of Italy began to emerge from the disintegration of its feudal system. Those were the critical years when the revolutionary hero Giuseppe Garibaldi stormed the beaches of Italy with the sort of young followers he had previously led in Latin American wars.

Garibaldi fought for two years, just long enough for a new ruling class to create a unified nation to its own liking. Little was done to relieve the poverty of the masses, as feudal lords were replaced by a new class of middle-class landowners. As the prince explains it, "The middle class does not want to destroy us; they want to replace us, gently."

In the film version, Cavaliere Aimone Chevelley travels to Sicily to offer the prince an appointment as a senator in the new government, which values his integrity and his intelligence. Chevelley, an emissary from King Victor Emmanuel II, represents Count Camillo Benso di Cavour, who was an influential figure in the emerging new state. The prince turns down the appointment.

Listen to me, Chevelley, I am most grateful to the government for having thought of me for the senate. . . . But I cannot accept. I am a member of

the old ruling class, . . . and what is more I am completely without illusions. What would the senate do with me, an inexperienced legislator who lacks the faculty for self-deception, an essential requisite for wanting to guide others? . . . What you need, Chevelley, are men who are good at masking their obvious personal interests with vague public ideals.

The prince recommends someone else, of whom he says: “As for illusions, I don’t think he has any more than I have, but he is clever enough to know how to create them when he needs them. He is the man for you.” The prince understands from a lifetime, in his words, as “a leopard,” that he is being replaced by “jackals,” new leaders who will lack any sense of duty or pride in leadership.

In his Berkeley speech, Mark Danner gave the graduates this reminder of politics today: “As an unnamed senior adviser [to President Bush] explained to a reporter last fall: We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out.’”