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Author(s): Kurt Spellmeyer

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AFTER THEORY: FROM TEXTUALITY TO ATTUNEMENT WITH THE WORLD

Kurt Spellmeyer

The hardest questions can be the simplest ones. For example, what was “theory”? In its heyday—the decade after 1968—theory could mean almost anything, from Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizoanalysis” to Habermas’s seemingly endless defense of “communicative rationality.” No matter what the word might have meant at the time, however, people somehow sensed its importance, and they knew, if they knew absolutely nothing else, that theory had to do with “the text.” But now, almost thirty years afterward, people somehow sense that theory is passé, and they know, if they still pay attention at all, that it has been displaced by any number of successors: by New Historicism, for instance, and by cultural studies, and by the eclectic mix referred to as “post-theory.” While terms like “cultural studies” and “post-theory” circulate as loosely as “theory” did in its brief golden age, theory’s successors all share among themselves at least one identifying feature—a commitment to descending from textuality into the particulars of everyday life.

Yet theory today is anything but dead, and it survives through the movements that claim to have left it behind. When Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* sets out to rethink the logic of heterosexuality, she calls on Derrida. When Homi Bhabha, in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, starts to map the new terrain of postcolonial studies, he goes back to Barthes and Bakhtin. Although we tend to see ourselves as working in the era after theory, the truth may be far more complicated—and also far more troubling. We are, perhaps, *trapped* in theory, and trapped so inextricably that even our most careful efforts to escape keep returning us to the isolation that drove us from theory in the first place. And now, when the future of our profession has begun to look uncomfortably like a rerun of our past, the moment may have come for us to admit that theory itself brought us here. If the world is not a text, then

Kurt Spellmeyer is Director of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Writing Program at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He is the author of *Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition*.

when we treat it as one we soon lose the capacity to differentiate between actions that can lead to meaningful change and those symbolic practices that substitute for action all too easily. Worse yet, once we have surrendered to the siren song of “the text,” nothing remains to call us back, since the failure of each new methodology—from Lévi-Strauss’s search for deep structures of the mind to Donald Morton’s critique of “post-ality”—only lends a greater urgency to the whole enterprise.

Theory, in other words, has outlived its own “death,” but its survival gives cold comfort to all the former converts who have irretrievably lost their faith. For those of us no longer charmed by the magic, by the myth, of the pursuit of signs—what other path remains if we want to be more than perpetually “post-”? What we need is nothing less than a paradigm shift: turning from the threadbare ideology of “the text,” we might start to explore an alternative so mundane that we have passed it over time after time in our scramble for sophistication and prestige. That alternative is ordinary sensuous life, which is not an “effect” of how we think but the ground of thought itself, or so I want to argue here. At this late hour, when theory’s successors can teach us nothing really new, what prevents us from returning to the idea of “the arts” by a long-forgotten path—the arts imagined as traditions of experience that intensify our sense of living in and with the world? If the humanities have, as I believe, very nearly lost the battle for the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens, then the future of English may well lie with those arts and the worlds they open up.

THE RHETORIC OF THEORY: A READING LESSON

The products of art and science owe their existence not merely to the effort of the great geniuses that created them, but also to the unnamed drudgery of their contemporaries. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

Walter Benjamin (233)

What Walter Benjamin observes of culture in general holds true for theory in particular: although it may express the very noblest of hopes, it also perpetuates the legacy of an unacknowledged violence. And precisely because so many people working in English studies have encountered theory only as liberating, that hidden legacy has passed unnoticed—and unredressed. I can still remember my own first encounter with theory, which seemed to arrive at the moment of my greatest professional and personal need. But as theory itself has helped us recognize, such small conjunctions, multiplied many times, are what we mean by “history.”

It happened on a January afternoon at a downtown Princeton bookstore where I went at the end of a uniquely unpleasant event. That event was the most recent meeting of New Jersey’s Basic Skills Council, which our governor had charged with assessing the public schools, and on which I held a seat as the director of the state’s

largest college-level writing program. Fourteen years and many millions of dollars into a campaign of twelfth-grade exit testing, the council had assembled the data to “prove” that thousands of graduates from the poorest urban neighborhoods—in Camden, Newark, and Jersey City—were functionally illiterate. But the data themselves were *all* we had; none of us knew why the scores were so low, and no one could explain with much clarity—although we were ostensibly the best in our field—how we should respond.

Our silence left me demoralized. As the snow piled up against the windows of the store, I found myself increasingly disturbed to think that we had measured the extent of “illiteracy” without ever knowing what the word really meant. Even more disturbing was the Council’s public confirmation, carried everywhere by the local media, of deeply entrenched beliefs about New Jersey’s “skills deficient” citizens—largely black or Hispanic, and almost always working class. After a decade in “remedial” education, I knew just how deep these beliefs could run, so deep that they shaped not only the policies of the state but also the canonical scholarship. One study I had been made to read when I was in graduate school spoke for much of the profession when it held that the children of the “culturally deprived . . . do not just think at an immature level: many of them do not think at all” (Bereiter et al. 107). And they could not think, this study maintained, partly because of their genetic heritage, which was cited in a footnote on selective black migration, and partly because their language lacked “the formal properties necessary for the organization of thought” (105, 113). A decade later, on that January afternoon, absolutely nothing had changed; from our data we expected to reach more or less the same conclusion, and the solution that the study had proposed long before was our state’s solution as well: to begin instruction at the zero point, proceeding as if these “children” had “no language” of their own (113).

Like most of the Council’s monthly meetings, the one in January dragged on so long that no one felt much relief when it wound down, and I spent what was left of the afternoon browsing numbly through the kind of “difficult” books I would otherwise have looked past. Somewhere in the store a string quartet was playing crisply on a compact disc, and it struck me as I stood listening that even if I traveled to the ends of the earth—to the Outback or Ulan Bator—I could not possibly be more distant than I was just then from the people we referred to as “skills deficient.” Camden and Jersey City were a million miles away, but the book I bought that afternoon, with the enigmatic title *Truth and Method*, helped me understand what “reading” was and why no two human beings could *ever* read the same passage in quite the same way. And on another afternoon three months afterward, as I slogged through the book’s last hundred pages or so, I realized that the author, Hans-Georg Gadamer—a protégé of Heidegger, not an instructor of “basic skills”—had given me the means to change nearly everything about what I did and who I was.

For the first time in my professional life, I found it possible to see the “skills deficient” differently, not as isolated individuals who had missed the chance for cognitive development, but as members of communities *strong* enough to survive despite enormous violence from outside. Although Gadamer himself would almost certainly disagree, given his commitment to the high culture of the West, his work still helped me recognize that people everywhere were historical beings no more capable of falling outside language and tradition than they were capable of falling outside time. Whether writing or thinking, speaking or acting, people are “always already” inside a linguistic world, and so thoroughly inside that we might say, as Gadamer did, not that we speak a language but that we ourselves are spoken (378, 549). Where the study I once read in graduate school had diagnosed a fundamental poverty, hermeneutic tradition revealed a plenitude to me; where the study called for a program of “no-nonsense” academic discipline, Gadamer invoked the vastly more humane ideal of learning as a journey and a conversation, an endless “fusion” of lifeworld “horizons” (306–7). Looking out from the horizon Gadamer opened for *me*, I recognized more clearly than I ever had before that teaching any subject was a self-defeating act unless all of those involved could find the means to enlarge their particular lifeworlds—worlds that were full and real in different ways but *equally* full and real. As Gadamer wrote in a passage that I am sure I will never forget, we always end our journeys by “returning home” (448).

Its detractors sometimes allege that theory changes nothing, but theory in my life has had far-reaching consequences. I acted on the insights theory offered me, and my actions touched the lives of many thousands of high school graduates whose experience at the university might have been more damaging than it turned out to be. For an entire generation in English studies, I believe, the encounter with theory followed a course like the one I have just retraced, an odyssey from silence, boredom, and paralysis to a sense of purpose and “empowerment,” as we used to say. Yet it seems increasingly obvious now that something went wrong with theory. When the Frankfurt sociologist Max Horkheimer used the word in the 1930s, he had in mind a practice of immanent critique launched at institutions like the university, with their tendency to reproduce the status quo in supposedly objective and enabling routines (188–203). But theory in the decades after 1968 rapidly became the central pillar of orthodox practice in the humanities. When Robert Scholes observed in 1985—and quite approvingly—that teachers should “read theory to ‘keep up,’” he reminded us, without meaning to, of just how far theory has traveled since the time when Horkheimer saw “keeping up” as a suspect idea (19). Once the margins had become prime real estate, who could be surprised to see *Paradise Lost* restored to its former stature as prophecy by showing how it anticipates Marx on class struggle? Instead of qualifying our statements, we were taught to put them *sous rature*; instead of saying that a character’s behavior looks ambiguous, we learned to say that she “is placed”—never mind by whom—“under the sign of ambiguity.”

As the tool of a self-styled critical avant-garde, theory landed Yale High Church deconstructionists in a special section of *Time* magazine, while the founders of cultural studies, sporting silk Armani jackets, made fashion statements for the sputtering New York press. Trivial as these events might seem, they tell us something essential about theory and the movements that have followed it. For the first time since the quiz-show days of Charles van Doren, scholars who might have started their careers with books on Donne's debt to Plotinus or Trollope's comedy of manners saw the chance for something like celebrity by turning to the signifying practices of Bugs Bunny or 2 Live Crew.

Yet there has been, I think, more to theory's success than the lure of celebrity can explain—and this “more” has to do with the character of theory as a resource for preserving our profession's prestige. Like every other form of information dignified with the name of “knowledge” today, theory gets produced by specialists. But theory differs from a piece in *Harper's* or a report on the *CBS Evening News*, whose writers are no less specialized than we are, because theory is uniquely the discourse of privileged *and* declining institutions whose concerns have grown so distant from everyday life that a sense of crisis overtakes the specialists themselves. To justify the privileged status of their work, these specialists must show that their thinking is somehow *superior* to common sense—more inclusive, more penetrating, more rigorous. But theory wins the battle at the cost of the war, since the discourse that strays too far from the everyday world runs the risk of losing its lay clientèle as well as the confidence of neophytes, who no longer see themselves figured in its ghostly narratives.

Theory and its successors have taken shape in the space opened up by the conflict between our hunger for prestige and our loneliness in an age of mass communications; yet the purpose of theory as we have often practiced it, under a variety of names, is not to make intellectual life more open and democratic by enlarging the circle of participants, but rather to invest the culture of expertise with an aura of unalterable permanence. Theory makes a *weapon* of marginality by reversing the relations of power between ourselves and a public inclined to dismiss our achievements and concerns out of hand. And while every work of theory turns the tables on its readers, one work that points with unintended candor to theory's self-destructive contradictions is Gayatri Spivak's essay on “Breast-Giver,” a short story by the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi. Before looking closely at Spivak's essay, though, I should explain that the story can be read straightforwardly as an account of a woman's unhappy life when the crippling of her husband forces her to become a wet-nurse. As Spivak herself concedes in a brief aside, Devi meant the woman to personify the troubled nation-state of India, from whom all its “children” take, giving nothing in return (244). But Spivak reads the story quite differently:

Thought, as *jouissance*, is not orgasmic pleasure genitally defined, but the excess of being that escapes the circle of the reproduction of the subject. It is the mark of the Other in the subject. Now psychoanalysis can only ever conceive of thought as pos-

sible through those mechanics of signification where the phallus comes to *mean* the Law by positing castration as punishment as such. Although the point is made repeatedly by Lacan that we are not speaking of the actual male member but of the phallus of the signifier, it is still obviously a gendered position. . . .

. . . to call Mahasweta's preoccupation in ["Breast-Giver"] with *jouissance* in the general sense "writing like a man" is to reduce a complex position to the trivializing simplicity of a hegemonic gendering. . . .

In ["Breast-Giver," the protagonist's body], rather than her fetishized deliberative consciousness (self or subjectivity), is the *place* of knowledge, rather than the instrument of knowing. (259–60)

To a reader unfamiliar with the conventions of high theory and its offspring, cultural studies, Spivak's interpretation is bound to seem like a parody of academic criticism at its worst. Readers have to make more than a modest reach, after all, if they want to trace out the connections between Devi's simple allegory and the grand themes that matter most to Spivak herself—writing, interpretation, reification, and the highly disincarnate form of ecstasy that the French, sad to say, call "*jouissance*." But theory's advocates would probably reply that Spivak's tendentiousness is just what we need. Like every text that tells us more than we already know, she confounds our familiar point of view, and by doing so forces us to see not only the story but also ourselves in an unexpected light.

Such, at least, is the prevailing party line, but how true is it, actually? New ways of reading stories can be wonderful, yet over and above its novelty, Spivak's text subjects its readers to a violence that practitioners of theory and its "post" avatars take great pains to deny. Reading Spivak *hurts*—hurts beginners, anyway—precisely because her prose demands that we relinquish a large measure of our agency. But the reader's loss of agency does not follow simply from the convolutions of her prose. That loss of agency results, instead, from the double bind in which Spivak's rhetoric locks every reader generous enough to give her work a hearing. On the one hand, the text promises something like a mass emancipation from traditions that have failed to hear and understand people like Mahasweta's protagonist, the much-invoked global "subaltern." But Spivak's rhetoric, on the other hand, compels its readers to abandon Mahasweta's words in order to wander through the labyrinths of Foucault's, Derrida's, Volosinov's, and Lacan's. And the result is not emancipation but a forced admission on the reader's part that even when these eminent intellects make very little sense indeed, they still somehow think more usefully than the ordinary reader ever could. If there are any "subalterns" to be found in this particular study, one of them is surely the reader, insofar as Spivak's practice of theory does to that reader what educators do to the people they have stigmatized as "remedial." By refashioning the character of "literacy" itself, the practitioners of theory have learned to transform whole shoals of articulate PhDs into stammering "illiterates." But Spivak is no less diminished than we are, to the degree that she feels compelled to write about a parable of Indian political life in a language that

makes India unspeakable. And, in fact, Spivak's largely Western audience comes away from her tour de force knowing something more about the Paris scene but absolutely nothing new about the people who live their lives in the villages and cities of West Bengal.

What disappears from Spivak's text is not just the reader's world, but also any sense of the world that produced Mahasweta's own narrative. And this violent act, which destroys and appropriates at the same time, is the quintessential gesture of both theory and remediation as they are typically practiced. In each case the motive is the same—the maintenance of a boundary between “ignorance” and “knowledge,” mystification and enlightenment. Constrained as she is by the language of theory, Spivak has chosen to be heard at a certain cost to others—by speaking the argot of professionals and by laying claim to an insight that transcends the experience of absolutely everyone except a few cognoscenti like the ones she dutifully cites. While attempting to make room for the excluded and disempowered, the theorist continues to occupy a privileged place indistinguishable from the scientist's role as an objective observer, or from the philosopher's pretensions to pure reason. The theorist still plays Socrates, with the reader standing dumbly in as Glaucon, while the truth itself remains always somewhere else, far removed from the reader's here and now. If this displacement of the here and now is theory's greatest strength, it is also theory's greatest danger, since we can never know, looking up from Santa Cruz or down from Morningside Heights, how things appear to those positioned somewhere else. But the problem is more serious than our failure to see the lay citizen's point of view. Over the last fifteen years or so, theory's universalizing ambitions have given us the spectacle of upper-middle-class white North Americans using French philosophers (most of them males) to make sense of narratives by and about “Third World women.” We can be sure, as well—and this strikes me as even worse—that at this very moment, college teachers from Cairo to Kuala Lumpur are busily stuffing their syllabi with readings that their counterparts in Paris would sniff at sourly as old news. Far from breaking with the legacy of colonization, this arrangement has simply reinstated it with a vengeance, so that the grandchildren of the Asian and African subjects who began their schoolday paying homage to “our forefathers the Gauls” now bone up on Derrida or Foucault. And the lesson we need to draw from this disastrous turn of events is that knowledge as we produce it in the academy—even when it takes the form of postcolonial critique—helps to perpetuate a truly global system of dependency.

THE KNOWLEDGE-CLASS PROFESSIONAL: A SOCIOLOGY OF THEORY

We will never understand the contradictions inherent in theory until we recognize a fundamental change in social life today, a change brought about by the passage

from the relative coherence of premodern communities to the fragmentation of “postmodernity.” Although we often want to fight the noble fight of “organic intellectuals,” deeply rooted in the local scene just as Gramsci was in prewar Turin, when we speak *ex cathedra* to our fellow citizens, we speak as their masters, not as their friends; and as powerful authorities, not as fellow sufferers. The world within which we operate today is much less like the one evoked by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* than it is like the one described by Gary Marx in an essay on his life as a sociologist:

In 1970, there could not have been many sociologists just three years beyond the Ph.D. who were as professionally satisfied and optimistic as I was. . . . Immigrants, gold miners, and aspiring actors might head West, but as an ambitious academic born on a farm in central California, I had headed east to where I thought the real action was—Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I had a job at Harvard with a higher salary and a longer contract (negotiated under threat of deserting to another Ivy League school) than the other assistant professors in the Department of Social Relations. I taught only one course and had a mammoth corner office, where I was protected from intruders by my own secretary in an outer office.

My book *Protest and Prejudice* had sold fifteen thousand copies and had been translated into Japanese. Various chapters had been reprinted in more than twenty books. (261)

Even when we want to play an oppositional role, our disciplines continue to operate within a system carefully designed to preserve what Pierre Bourdieu calls our “distinction,” our symbolic distance from the people below us on the ladder of prestige and opportunity (22–28). But the reality of this distance becomes obvious, as it does in Marx’s narrative, only at the points of greatest tension between what we want to think about ourselves and what we actually do. Although Marx wrote a dissertation on insurgency, he completed his research with the aid of highly competitive fellowships; although he sided with landless peasants, he cut a sharp deal with Harvard; although he argued for cooperation and equality, he beat out his colleagues in the struggle for a big office. I cannot help thinking of another Marx, disenchanted with the academy, hounded across the English channel and living in London as his children died from illnesses that he lacked the money to treat. But to dismiss Gary Marx’s behavior as hypocrisy—or to say only, as he does, that success went to his head—is to miss the essential point. Sociologists can write the most scathing critiques, or they can take on the more conventional role of Parsonian apologists for the status quo, but in either case they often leave unchallenged—and unchanged—the basic relations of production today, including the production of knowledge itself.

As the historian Samuel Haber observes, the modern professions in America grew up along with the industrial economy as a reaction to the social leveling that followed the decline of the old elites (xii–xiii). For a brief period at the end of the

nineteenth century, one kind of labor had begun to look very much like every other kind, but in response to this leveling, doctors and lawyers, engineers and college teachers drew on the older ideology of “station” to create another hierarchy: doctors no longer “did work,” they had a “profession.” Yet the price that doctors paid for their privilege—ostensibly, if not always in fact—was a life of unstinting service to the very people they perceived as their social inferiors. Things are no longer so simple, though, if they ever were. While Haber identifies the *origins* of a profession like ours, his findings do not help us understand how the professions operate today, when their power no longer relies, as it once did, on the persistence of organic communities and the social contract they once preserved. Gary Marx, after all, sounds less like a country parson or a family physician than a film director or a courtroom top gun. Students and colleagues may have learned important things from his work, but no one benefited from that work quite as tangibly as Marx himself, and we need to consider why.

One account of the professions today would place them, over their protests perhaps, in the context of the “information society,” where they represent a segment of the larger class of “knowledge workers.” As another sociologist, Bernice Martin, has observed, this new class “stands structurally between the owners of capital and the proletariat,” and the new class has raised itself above the proletariat by not only its knowledge but its expertise as well: its capacity, that is, to generate novel *kinds* of knowledge, virtually nonstop. Within premodern societies, the learned man was typically the master of information valued for its immunity to change; today, however, the value of most knowledge rapidly decays once the luster of its novelty has dimmed. For this reason, the power of the knowledge class lies in the production of *estrangement* rather than in the preservation of stability—in the ability “to assemble a bricolage of . . . symbols into customized packages that are in some sense [perpetually] unique” (126). Advertising operates along quite similar lines, so that Ralph Lauren never simply sells a line of towels but manufactures an entire artificial world combining shirts and towels, ties and drapes to evoke nineteenth-century Nantucket or Sante Fe in the spring. And this new economy of bricolage may account, as well, for the dizzying succession of movements and schools, positions and counter-positions on parade at places like the MLA, where theory and its successors enjoy preeminence. While we may someday discover that Ralph Lauren’s publicists get their ideas from Umberto Eco or Derrida, it seems to me more likely that the tidal wave of change has overtaken *us*. Truth be told, we could not have continued *credibly* to turn out knowledge of the older, pre-theoretical sort—premised as it was upon the maintenance of tradition—when “knowledge” meant the opposite everywhere else.

The restlessness and rootlessness of theory underscore our membership in the knowledge class, but nowhere does the family resemblance become more clear than in our conflicted attitude toward teaching. For our predecessors at the close of the

nineteenth century, the idea of a conflict between scholarship and teaching would have seemed almost unthinkable, precisely because they saw themselves as preservers of a culture that they *shared* with the young men under their tutelage. By imbuing undergraduates with the sensibility of the Anglo-Saxon elite, our predecessors reinforced the boundary between the ruling class, sequestered on the campus green, and the swelling ranks of the great unwashed, more or less eternally debarred. Today, we draw the boundary at a different place, partly because the great unwashed have come in—literally millions and millions of them—and partly because we ourselves no longer serve the same “custodial” function that our predecessors did. And consequently, we no longer set out to make all our students into younger versions of ourselves; rather, we create within the university the distinction that most matters in the world at large—between the knowledge experts and the laity.

Charles Sykes’s notorious exposé *Profscam* is clearly wrong about many things, but he points to trends that simply make no sense unless the university has indeed gone over to the new regime—trends such as the swelling ranks of “world class” faculty who never set foot in a lecture hall, or the burgeoning of quasi-independent research institutes throughout a decade of rising tuitions and declining teacher-student ratios. Sykes notes that in 1986, fewer than two-thirds of the faculty at the University of Wisconsin did any teaching at all, while at the same time the shortage of seats in required classes meant that the average student had to spend more than five years en route to a bachelor’s degree. Irving Shain, the former chancellor at Wisconsin, told Sykes a story that might apply, with a few variations, to almost any field today. “In the beginning,” Shain recalled, “every biology student got to disembowel a frog of his own.” But “because of insufficient [funds], the university had to cut back to one frog per class.” Now they have “a movie of someone dissecting a frog and [they] show it over and over” (37). Compelling as this story seems—to me, anyway—I still think that we would be mistaken to accept Sykes’s view that changes of this kind are primarily caused by the egoism of professors or the shortsightedness of deans. Rather, the decline of teaching points to the exclusionary character of the disciplines, whose power derives from their control of a specialized field and the things that define it, among them tenured positions, editorial boards, endowed chairs, and a body of primary material widely recognized as their *property*.

In an essay on the state of criticism today, one preeminent theorist, Jonathan Culler, openly expresses about teaching what many people think but hesitate to say. While admitting that a few of his fellow theorists have given their work a “pedagogical and democratic inflection,” Culler represents their forays into pedagogy as distinctly “double-edged”:

For the most part, [the] appeal to teaching is a conservative, even reactionary gesture: the suggestion that thinking and writing about literature ought to be controlled by the possibilities of classroom presentation is usually an attempt to dismiss new

lines of investigation or abstruse critical writings without confronting them directly. . . . Few would seriously suggest that physicists or historians should restrict their work to what can be communicated to 19-year-olds. (94)

Whatever we might think of Culler's priorities, he spells out with great precision the value system that obtains in the academy today, if not at every college and public university, then certainly at the preeminent schools that send quantities of newly minted PhDs across the continent. And yet, to argue against theory for the sake of teaching is still to misjudge the professional terrain, just as Marshall Gregory does when he writes, in the *ADE Bulletin*, about the mismatch between his training and his day-to-day professional life:

As a student deeply immersed in nineteenth-century British studies and literary criticism, I certainly expected at the end of my doctoral labors to be effortlessly translated, like Enoch, into a higher kind of academic heaven-haven, levitated up and out of my library carrel at Chicago . . . and gently lowered into another library carrel at good old Research U, presumably in a beautiful city with a good symphony and affordable housing.

Gregory goes on to say that none of his professors at Chicago "ever suggested to me the reality that I would find in [an actual] classroom, much less helped me prepare for it" (20). But Gregory fails to understand that the system is working *properly* when it generates this contradiction—a contradiction that preserves a crucial hierarchy—just as the system works properly when students leave English 101 and never write again, or when they finish college without having learned where Paraguay might be, or when they wake up on the morning of their Commencement wondering what in the world they can do with a degree in English, besides, that is, managing an Arby's and wishing they were back in Chaucer class. While it is certainly true that our current system of "public" education furnishes the professions with a venue for the recruitment and training of new members, the primary purpose of a course like Psychology 101 or "Introduction to Political Science" is not to disseminate expert knowledge but to ensure lay support for further specialized inquiry. The point is not to produce three or four hundred additional colleagues every semester—an economic disaster for any profession—but to persuade another generation of non-specialists that the subject properly belongs to someone else.

And yet the worst casualties of this division of cultural labor may not be our students but ourselves, to the degree that our lives as professionals have been shaped as decisively by our isolation as by our structural privilege. If my own experience is typical, the first lesson we have learned on the path to the PhD is the obligation to play a role cut off from the worlds outside the university, since we share these mundane worlds with non-specialists, while our knowledge is supposed to reinstate the crucial distinction between blind experience and the insight that flows from the practice of criticism. So completely have we come to presuppose that understanding and estrangement go hand-in-hand that even a person like Edward

Said, though a tireless critic of professional isolation, still celebrates our state of homelessness as the hallmark of urbanity (Said 319–21, 333–36). It seems to me, however, that we cannot afford to take our own urbanity for granted.

At a moment in our history when many observers have commented on the accelerating breakdown of communities and the spreading mood of cynicism, we need to ask if learning as we now imagine it helps to strengthen our students' sense of agency and self-worth while replenishing the fragile sources of compassion and mutual aid. Or have our "projects" actually served to discredit local ways of life on behalf of the knowledge society? Positioned on the threshold between the specialists and the laity, teachers of undergraduate English might begin to explore these questions by openly acknowledging the divided character of their own situation. Nothing could be less helpful, in my view, than to embrace once again an image of academic intellectuals as representatives of "Culture" on the one hand or "the People" on the other. Instead, we need to understand that the triumph and persistence of theory, like the call to revive "books" in an age of television, is symptomatic of a widening gap between the concerns of elites who produce what counts as knowledge—Fredric Jameson and Gertrude Himmelfarb *both* belong to this new elite—and the needs of those to whom this knowledge gets strategically parceled out. Precisely because I believe, as John Dewey did, that a knowledge made for others is no knowledge at all, I want my students to use the work of specialists to complicate their own self-understanding, but I also want those students to preserve an attitude of profound skepticism toward the authorities whose job it is, no matter what the ideology of the day might be, to turn out properly tractable subjects (Dewey 93–97).

Of course, humans do not live by skepticism alone. The case can be made that the most important social changes of our time are not taking place inside the academy, but in the private lives of women and men who have begun to explore new and uncoercive forms of interaction—as couples, families, support groups, "salons," and congregations—and in our courses we too might explore interactions of this same uncoercive kind. That these experiments are still largely confined to the private sphere only shows how far the so-called public sphere—the classroom perhaps most glaringly of all—has to go before it might be regarded as "democratic" in any credible sense. And yet the openness that people have begun to pursue in their private lives they increasingly expect in the public sphere as well (Giddens, *Transformation* 184–204). The enormous popularity of Bernie Siegel, a physician who supports patients in the desire for more active control over their own medical treatment, testifies to a significant change in popular attitudes toward the system of professions. Since medicine has set the pace throughout this century for all the other kinds of expertise, we may have some small reason to be hopeful. But whether academic intellectuals, who have historically marched in the rear-guard, will support a more equitable distribution of cultural power remains an open question. Labor

reform, women's suffrage, and the civil rights movement—achievements the academy would like some of the credit for—each took root far from the campus and long before we snatched them up as badges of honor. Yet in deciding where to place our loyalties, we should remember that we have choices other than the two most obvious ones: continuing the legacy of theory-by-other-means or else turning in our resignations. If we want to start playing a different role, then perhaps we need to make a different kind of knowledge.

What this different kind of knowledge might concretely look like is anybody's guess, but our own profession's history may provide some unexpected clues. English in the bad old days was elitist without apology, but its faculty developed a culture of teaching designed to instill a *felt* sense of being at home in the world, a sense quite unlike the nervous style of our own times, with its penchant for abstraction, self-doubt, and critique. No matter how much smarter our work appears when we set it beside their amateurish scholarship, our knowledge is no more egalitarian—and in fact, it may prove much less amenable than theirs to any future culture of democracy. For all its truly vicious blindnesses, and I scarcely wish to downplay them here, the sensibility of our predecessors had its foundation in their class's claim to agency or “freedom” as a natural right, a claim I regard as spurious not because I see freedom as an illusion, but because those men retained it for themselves alone. What would happen, though, if we now set out to revive the “aristocratic” sense of the world as home while repudiating its exclusiveness? Wouldn't such an undertaking need to start where theirs did long ago: that is, with an attention to emotional, sensuous life, because our thinking and our acting have their origins in this crucial source? Or, to put my question just a little differently, at a time when knowledge rather than force of arms has become *the* instrument of domination, won't a democratic counter-knowledge need to take root deep beneath the arid surface of “the text”?

REIMAGINING KNOWLEDGE AS ATTUNEMENT WITH THE WORLD

About ten years ago, a friend of mine, a physicist and astronomer, had flown from New Jersey to Arizona for the most important moment in his entire professional life. Many times at the start of his career he had applied for a week on a telescope in the hills, and then, once a panel had accepted his request, he patiently waited almost two more years before his special moment arrived. By then, of course, other things had happened to him: marriage and a child, and the slow and painful struggle for publication. Now the decision on his tenure was coming up. He was buying a house and he wondered about that; he had done some research, but he had his doubts. Still, the moment, *his* moment, was about to occur, and when it did, absolutely everything would take place as he had planned. To his amazement, though,

absolutely nothing did. The weather turned bad; he waited. It got worse, and he waited, and he kept waiting until his five days were gone.

Along with his clothing and some technical notes, my friend took several novels and an anthology of poems—to read, he supposed, once the data came pouring in. But now that there would be no data at all, he picked up the anthology and tried to find some poetry that could put his mind to rest. The tension, as he described it, throbbed through his chest and arms, but then he found one poem that switched the current off. And the two lines of the poem that brought him the deepest calm are the ones he remembers even now, the lines almost every English major knows, about “the still point of the turning world . . . The inner freedom from the practical desire” (119). It was a poem about the tyranny of time, read by a man whose time had literally run out.

It goes without saying, however, that the way my friend spoke about T. S. Eliot’s poem was not the way most critics handle poetry today. The salient features of a poem, they might insist, have no more to do with the reader’s world—with his perennial fears and his immediate desires—than they do with the poet’s own intentionality. Some of us in English might say instead that what matters most is a poem’s place within a *system* of conventions and codes—the same system within which we ourselves think our thoughts and look out at the world. The poem is a text and the world is a text, and even you and I are ensembles of texts, each of which keeps getting refigured in an endless circulation of signs and tropes. Granted, one reader might bring to the poem certain memories and feelings quite unlike another reader’s; still, the theorist’s appropriate concerns cannot lie with the particulars of an individual response but with the discursive constraints that define how everyone will respond more or less.

Yet something gets lost when we travel with these critics, something essential to much more than poetry. As a person who has never cared for Eliot, I have probably read *Four Quartets* fifteen times without finding solace in his rather bloodless evocation of the still point in a turning world. Other readers, I know, feel quite differently, among them my friend the physicist. But this distinction is precisely the one that gets lost in the flattening of our world into a text—the distinction between my friend’s experience of the poem and my lack of any such experience. What gets lost in the semiotic universe is the crucial distinction between “codes” or “signs,” which simply “signify,” and the living words that foster a “felt” resonance between ourselves and the world.

The poem, we might say, “spoke to my friend”: for him, it had a certain resonance. But what does it mean for words to resonate? One reason why no answer may lie ready at hand may be that our ideas about words have grown systematic and impersonal on the model of science, as though people can never think reliably except at an enormous distance from their sensations and emotions. I find it more than slightly ironic, though, that with all our attention to structures and codes, con-

ventions and tropes, the *real* sciences keep telling us simple things we seem unwilling to hear. Many paleo-archaeologists now believe that language did not arrive on the scene at a single juncture in our prehistory, but gradually developed, as all forms of human culture have, through endless interactions with our habitat, renewed and refined over thousands of years. Yet the prehistory of humankind is something more than the idyllic narrative of our gradual “evolution.” Language and culture begin, we are now told, with a *shift* of habitat—out of the trees and down onto the plains—a shift so drastic that it forced a fundamental change in almost everything we did: how we stood, how we moved, how we slept, even how we dreamed, perhaps (Campbell; Sheets-Johnstone). Our language and our culture start, in other words, as responses to the suffering brought about by this irrevocable change—by humankind’s collective waking into a world that seemed confusing and dangerous. And although words enable us to transform the world—through the use of complex tools, for example—they primarily enable us to transform ourselves by reshaping what we do and how we do it.

But even to say this is still to remain under the spell of semiotic idealism, because many of the changes that language brings about occur on a level the “linguistic turn” cannot even start to address. So long as our language remains routine—*only* an array of “codes” and “signs”—its essential character is concealed from us, but when words begin to resonate, we undergo a bodily and emotional transformation. To be insulted, to be caught in an error or in a lie, to hear unexpectedly that a loved one has died, is to *feel* intensely even before we are able to *understand* exactly what has just happened. Your face flushes, your eyes water, your heartbeat picks up, the muscles in your stomach clench and unclench. We have all been carefully trained to dismiss these reactions as incidental to the dynamics of “textuality,” but signification cannot occur without an experiential anchoring, since we know and remember only what has changed our immediate relations to the world. Such change can assume a negative form, as in the heightened sense of pain produced by the experience of challenge or frustration. Or, as in my friend’s case, change can produce the pleasure that follows from a sense of connectedness—the sense that Shigenori Nagatomo calls “attunement with the world” (Nagatomo 197–202).

The roots of language lie in suffering, as I said, but the roots of the self lie in attunement and release. Our conviction that the self is enduring and real—is more than an ensemble of random events—depends on our ability to move past suffering, not once but again and again. It can scarcely be an accident that psychotics are often the childhood victims of a violence that fragments the self so completely there will never be a lasting synthesis. Nor is it merely coincidence that people who endure prolonged physical pain are often at a loss to describe their personal history, not because they have repressed it but because meaning follows from our connections with things—connections that intense pain erodes and erases. Shortly before his suicide, the writer Primo Levi recalled that the occupants of the concentration

camp where he was imprisoned were exposed to such relentless pain that escape and resistance had become unthinkable: the world itself had vanished from their horizon of consciousness (11). It is only through our journeys out of suffering into pleasure that each of us can become a self. And it is only through these journeys toward coherence in ourselves that we can move beyond the self, as when a baby finds its parents' presence "transferred" to a blanket or a favorite toy (Winnecott 167–72). Repeated many hundreds, many thousands, of times, the transition from the parent to the blanket, and then from the blanket to the home and neighborhood, weaves together unconnected places and events into a coherent "lifeworld," a place where memory, meaning, and ultimately love become ever-present possibilities.

If the body, and not language, is the source of the self and the doorway into the living world, it is also the ground of all conviviality. With a spinal tumor blocking more and more of the signals sent from his arms and legs to his brain, the anthropologist Robert Murphy described his loss of motor functions as a "deepening silence." "As my body closes in upon me," he writes, "so also does the world. . . . To fall quietly and slowly into total paralysis is much like either returning to the womb or dying slowly. . . . This growing stillness of the body invades one's apprehension of the world . . . and I must continually fight the tendency for this growing passivity to overcome my thoughts." But "there is," Murphy adds, "a perverse freedom" in "such deep quietude" (193–94). Regrettably, this freedom is the only one that we in the academy now seem to recognize. Of course, our playful disembodiment, which is not the less destructive for pretending to be play, has a history that predates Derrida or Lacan. Plato inaugurates philosophy in the West by denouncing the senses as inimical to knowledge, which he equates with an abstract order that dissolves the knower's subjectivity. But the era of theory inaugurates a different and "postmodern" form of otherworldly knowledge, one that offers us a multitude of "subject positions" while persistently subverting their embodiment. We have many, many different *roles* but, increasingly, no *selves* because the formation of a self requires that our actions help to sustain a continuity between the present and past, and between feeling and thought.

Continuity, of course, is troublesome; continuity makes people far less tractable than they might otherwise be, and so it seems imperative that we ask ourselves if English studies has a vested interest in the current, disconnected status quo. Whether the venue is an essay by Judith Butler or an advertisement for Guess jeans, isn't the logic unnervingly similar? Each encounter with the text underscores the reader's lack—his failure to see what gender really is, her failure to be thin and tall enough. And this failure, this lack, initiates an ordeal of involuntary change that never leads us back to a still point in the turning world, but only, once again, to a sense of insufficiency. As the philosopher Susan Bordo maintains, social power in our time often operates by colonizing the self, first evacuating and then reconstructing it, as we see in mass pathologies like anorexia and bulimia (45–69). The

eighteen-year-old girl who learns from the ad that she looks somehow wrong can stick a finger down her throat five times a day. But a similar dynamic may be at work when a frightened student or a younger colleague feels compelled to talk the current lit-crit talk. In both cases, the novice learns to accept a condition like the one that Murphy describes, in which the world sustained by experience withdraws. Night might be day; right be left, with everything displaced and put *sous rature*. Under these conditions, however, texts no longer speak to us. Instead, when they insist that we permit ourselves to “be spoken”—as Gadamer once claimed approvingly and as I once believed—they actually demand that we *remake ourselves* in conformity with the project of the theorist. And our reward for submitting to this painful regimen is seldom the renewal of connections to actual others, the people we happen to know in daily life. Don’t we learn, instead, to serve an anonymous “they”? for the graduate student, something called “the profession”; for the anorexic girl, an admirer in whose radiant gaze she will be real at last. When a baby turns to the blanket as a surrogate for a parent’s arms, the transitional object “works” because the blanket provides a *genuine* satisfaction—a continuity in the baby’s felt life. But in the culture of postmodernity, the objects of desire almost never culminate in a concrete satisfaction for *us*; instead, they feed a thoroughly commodified social self whose needs become more pressing than the needs of our own bodies, as every person knows who works twelve-hour days for the sake of rewards as intangible as “reputation” and “the career.”

But think, if you will give yourself the freedom to, about the different kinds of pleasure people get from their most mundane involvements with the world—watching leaves shake in the hot summer wind, listening to the sound of rain, tracing the smooth, wet curve of a child’s spine with the palm of a soapy hand. And think, if you can stand it, about all the essays written ten or fifteen years ago that began with the claim to be writing “on the margin”; or of all the works today that call themselves “genealogies”; or of all the dissections of cinematic gaze that open with a summary of the mirror stage. The writers of these works are not simply sycophants or opportunists. To write in this way is to *become* Derrida, to *become* a second Foucault or a little Lacan. In the same way, Madonna’s fans dress like Madonna, walk and talk like her, and read books about her life.

I see it as crucial to recognize, though, that these practices of impersonation are not new to the academy. Well before the present postmodern interlude, scholars made their reputations, as many still do now, by writing themselves into the lives of their great man. The Beckett specialist somehow became his incarnation; the Stevens scholar learned to speak in Stevens’s voice. The time has come to acknowledge that academic literacy, at least as we have constructed it so far, is deeply complicit with the same culture of disembodiment that makes possible Elvis look-alikes and the stalking of the stars by their admirers, who cannot break free from obsession except by murdering their idealized alter-egos. While we might prefer to dis-

miss as naïve all the people who watch movies like *Terminator II*, we in the academy unknowingly share their fundamental orientation. No one goes to the theaters for emotional catharsis, and no one could be more absurdly deceived than we are when we close-read the bad android's metamorphoses as signifying the protean character of late capitalism. The cultural force of film derives, instead, from the chance that it offers the viewer to become someone else—to leave behind everyday existence for an imaginary realm, and this is exactly what we do when we read poems as “texts” and not as speech addressed to us, commentaries on our actual affairs.

Textuality is one way to know the world, but language does not become a “text” until we contemplate it from the standpoint of alienation. Language becomes “text,” I am trying to suggest, only after it has failed to correspond to the character of our lived worlds and then, instead of making changes in our actual lives, we suppress the world itself. But when our words do their proper work by making the world more fully present to us, they disappear below the surface of consciousness, and their disappearance indicates that we have moved beyond our isolation. In an essay on the Western Apaches' sense of place, Keith Basso remembers learning from one old man that their landscape is everywhere made meaningful to them by a fabric of ancient narratives. “All these places have stories,” the old man told him; and the stories, Basso learned, hold the Apaches' universe together, so tightly together that word and place can no longer be distinguished (102). For the Apaches, stories bring about a fusion of horizons far more radical than the one that Gadamer describes, linking culture to nature and perception to collective myth and history.

But what future might such stories have in our society, where our Great Mysterium is not the earth and its perennial rhythms but the frenzy of exchange? People who find themselves at home in the world are typically poor consumers, and the academy needs to sell *ideas* just as Detroit sells cars and Fifth Avenue sells clothes. Deferral and displacement, difference and the endless play of signs—this is not how things really are but how things seem in a society where domination takes the form of control over access to the world itself. It should come as no surprise that the post-modern condition resembles nothing so much as Robert Murphy's mental state in the last months of his life. “Given the magnitude of this assault on the self, it is,” he wrote, “understandable that [a] major component of the subjective life of the handicapped is anger” (106). And if anger is, as some might say, the prevailing mood within the academy, it is also the ruling passion of our society as a whole. To pursue attunement, to renew emotional coherence, is not simply to challenge the existing order, but to help fashion an alternative.

For all our celebrations of resistance and revolt, no alternative is more revolutionary than our resistance to disembodiment and the pursuit of wholeness in our immediate experience. But how might such a wholeness lie within our reach, when theory and critique have unmistakably become the preeminent forms of knowledge in our time, as highly valued by Peter Drucker, the Wall Street savant, as they are

by Marxists like Etienne Balibar (Drucker 64; Balibar 165)? If theory and critique free us from nothing finally, but contribute to a routinizing of expression unparalleled in our history, then perhaps the way out lies in a domain that the “linguistic turn” has caused us to overlook: I mean the domain of “the arts,” understood not as the cunning lies told by an elite, nor as the property of specialists whose goal is technical virtuosity, but as traditions of attunement with the world, available to everyone everywhere but also now diligently suppressed.

“Art” as I want to define it here is what James Scott calls a weapon of the weak. Far from enticing us to overlook contradiction, practices that rise to the level of an art respond to cognitive dissonance by taking us beyond ourselves and back into the world. Initially, this movement can feel like a loss, as when a writer seems to drop the thread of her argument or when a painter’s subject, so long looked upon, suddenly becomes “unseeable.” What disappears, however, is not the world, but the constructions—the established “ways of seeing”—that prevent us from embracing it, as it is right now. This is why, perhaps, “great artists” have so often claimed to break free from conventions of every kind. “No theories! Only works,” Cézanne wrote. “Theories corrupt” the “shimmering chaos” that “we are” (qtd. in Fischer 74). And this is why, perhaps, art as experience has been so thoroughly suppressed—*especially* in “postmodernity”—because it unfolds in an open space that no one can own or close down.

For more reasons than I have the time to talk about here, that open space is not the one in which we tend to do our work. Anyone who contemplates the testing empire of the ETS and the new alliances of schools and industry; anyone who thinks about the sophisticated inertia of our professions and the spread of electronic media that encourage mass passivity; absolutely anyone, in other words, can see that our society is unprepared to choose Cézanne’s shimmering chaos over the steady light of instrumental certainty. But whether we like reading by that dull gray light or not, there is a violence at the heart of our society, where the powerlessness of the many sustains the power of the few. And in the absence of any real alternatives, this violence will continue to overturn every kind of knowledge that we manage to devise, Platonic truth as well as deconstructive play. What our society needs most urgently is not another theoretical “advance”—toward a new discipline called grammatography, let’s say, or psycho-dialectical materialism—but a better understanding of the practices through which everyone might enter the open space where Cézanne felt himself at home. Yet, in order to discover and protect such practices, English studies needs to undergo a change more profound than many people might like. We will need to become ethnographers of *experience*: I do not mean armchair readers of the “social text,” but scholar/teachers who find out how people actually *feel*. And far from bringing English studies to a dismal close, the search for basic grammars of emotional life may give us the future that we have never had, a future beyond the university.

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