

Commentary

SPECIALISTS WITH SPIRIT: NEW AGE RELIGION, ENGLISH STUDIES, AND THE “SOMATIC TURN”

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Where the fulfillment of [one's work] cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values . . . the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. . . . About those living in the final stages of this process, it might truly be said that they are “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.”

– Max Weber (182, translation altered)

Imagine for a minute that you not only work in English but that you also believe in God. If you *did*, you might lead a double life, engaged five or six days of every week deconstructing master narratives or tracking knowledge / power, and then on the seventh day, at least for several hours, doing something altogether different. Even if those hours were your most important ones, you would probably keep the secret to yourself – for reasons best explained, I'm inclined to think, by the history of higher learning in the U.S., which began with religious ties but then moved aggressively, over the last hundred years or so, toward secularism, science, and specialization. And given the academy's astonishing growth, who would want to argue now against this move? By abandoning our claim to “ultimate values,” by becoming producers of specialist knowledge, our forerunners won a privileged place in the emerging social order, an order that no longer needed values anyway, premised as it was on “rationality” in the administration of its human subjects. With so much to gain from this process, and so much to lose – a process, as Max Weber would have it, of progressive “disenchantment” – English studies climbed aboard reluctantly, though since then, we have done pretty well. Yet who can help but notice, in our darker hours at least, that something's missing from our professional lives, something rather like religion, after all.

Of course, thanks to T. S. Eliot and Northrop Frye, the split with religion took place later in English studies than in many other fields, but

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perhaps for this very reason, the “r” word still sounds vaguely threatening to many ears, signifying a repressive institutional past and the dreaded “Law of the Father.” At this moment, though, our nervousness may have a more immediate cause: instead of disappearing, as its detractors prophesied, religion is now witnessing a resurgence – a resurgence and a radical transformation which are my principal subjects here. I want to argue that these developments pose a challenge to the poststructuralist academy, but I also believe that the resurgence of religion could turn out to be our saving grace. If the humanities have tried for a hundred years to imagine themselves as a science of some kind – of myths and symbols, signs and codes, a “political unconscious” – I believe that they can never get entirely free from concerns and practices they have always shared with religion. Like it or not, we’re in the business of constructing inner lives, and the sooner we admit the need for an inner life, the sooner we can see why religion still counts – and why English studies might count in the same way.

At the outset I should add, however, that our problem is somewhat more complex than the overt suppression of an inner life already there for everyone: the problem is precisely that an inner life has become difficult to argue for on the terms defined by the critical spirit of our day. And given this predicament – this relentless annihilation of interiority – Weber’s description of the modern world as an “iron cage” of meaningless routine strikes me as an understatement. For many intellectuals today, outside the academy as well as inside, religious values of even the vaguest kind are always construed as fundamentalist: in the words of Katha Pollitt, “a farra-go of authoritarian nonsense and. . . the eternal enemy of human happiness and freedom” (qtd. in Kazin 16). But when we permit ourselves to think along these lines, we ignore the highest aspirations of many millions of our fellow citizens. What are we to make, for example, of the Promise Keepers, the Christian men’s movement whose ecumenical rallies routinely drew *twenty times* the attendance at the average MLA? Or of N. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Travelled*, on the best-seller list for more than 500 weeks? Or of the impressive sales figures for Thomas Moore, a former Catholic monk, Betty Eadie, a Christian visionary, and Deepak Chopra, an M.D. and television celebrity who combines standard Western medicine with ayurvedic practice? Whether we take our cue from William Kilpatrick on the right or from Mark Edmundson on the left, it would be easy to denigrate these developments as symptoms of a spreading irrationality, a rebirth of “Gothic” fatalism in an age of mass culture (Edmundson 71-121). Even the small handful of observers who have managed to look sympathetically on the growing presence of “New Age” religion find themselves at a loss to

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explain what they observe: is it just another well-hyped trend or an indication of some genuine cultural change (Ross; Torgovnick 172-88)?

For the people committed to this change, however, there is much less ambiguity. One best selling writer on women's spirituality – Marianne Williamson – describes it as a revolution. "A mass movement is afoot in the world today," she writes, "spiritual in nature and radical in its implications" (xvi):

Most people feel it, some deride it, many embrace it and no one can stop it. . . . We are turning away from a purely worldly orientation. We seek an ancient God and a modern God. We feel a current of change, a cosmic electricity running through our veins. However disparate our personalities and interests, we all agree on one very important point: Mankind has come to a major crossroads. . . . From channeled entities claiming to hail from the Pleiades to fundamentalist Christians, from the prophecies of Nostradamus to visions of the Virgin Mary. . . come predictions of global shift, perhaps cataclysm, in the years ahead. (3-5)

To my ear, this passage echoes Engels and Marx, but the revolution that Williamson foresees is aimed at modernity as a whole and not just at our economic order. For readers inside the university, her call to arms may sound absurdly grand, and also absurdly indiscriminate, bringing together in a single movement people no one might foresee sitting comfortably on the same side – Zen Buddhists and spirit channelers, devotees of Blessed Virgin as well as charismatic Christians. Our term for all of this might be "mystification," but in view of Williamson's enormous readership, such a dismissal seems a bit like mystification on our part, although we have, perhaps, good reason for averting our eyes. The transformation of religion now underway poses a challenge to our authority that seems unparalleled historically. When Jerry Falwell's Liberty University or Pat Robertson's *700 Club* takes on "secular humanism," they still engage with us on the intellectual ground that we ourselves have defined – pitting, for example, "creation science" against its Darwinian predecessor, or promoting certain triumphalist versions of Western history over those now favored by academic historians. I believe that the challenge we now face, however, is quite unlike the ones offered by these familiar, and eminently orthodox, opponents: a challenge posed not simply by a knowledge that rivals ours – the Bible versus Freud or the power of positive

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thinking counterposed to negative dialectics – but by a different *way of knowing*.

I found myself face to face with this “different way” on a recent trip to one famous “New Age” sacred site – the *Santuario* in Chimayo, New Mexico. Although its reputation as a “power place” ought to have prepared me, I was surprised by the long line of worshippers shuffling in and out the church’s huge wooden doors. People lit candles and said prayers, and there were so many candles the day I went that the main room smelled hot and sweet with paraffin. The church had some kind of altar – I can’t quite remember it now – but no one seemed to pay it much attention. What they had come for, the real *Santuario*, waited in a small room to the left, mostly unadorned, with a hard dirt floor. At the center of the floor was a hole into which the pilgrims reached to touch soil alive with a mysterious curative power. Most of them knelt down and barely touched the rim; a few of them carried away some grains of earth. Respectfully, I turned around and walked slowly out, but once I had passed through the great doors again, I found myself standing under cool cottonwoods, entranced by the chatter of birds drawn, I guessed then, by a small rushing stream nearby.

For me, the striking thing about the crowd at the shrine was not its size – which could hardly compare to a line outside the average Multiplex Cinema – but the diversity of the worshippers. Some of the pilgrims were Hispanic and some, in a state with the second lowest average income nationally, must have belonged to the working poor. But many of the visitors were very clearly middle class, and many were the kind of “Anglos” – trendy, clean, and tasteful – one might find on the streets of Santa Fe. It seemed that all kinds of people came to worship there, but given their diversity, what exactly were they worshipping? No one who saw the santos clustered on the altar, or the ornaments on the walls of the nave, could have ignored the earthy, earnestly Catholic quality of the place, but where were the priests? Could it be possible, I asked myself then, that people now journey to the shrine precisely because religion has survived only as nostalgia, only as the *idea* of religion? Or is it rather that religion occupies a new place in our lives at the end of the century?

TECHNOLOGIES OF THE BODY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Perhaps the best way to map the terrain of religion in popular culture might be to start with the places where people of our kind – academics schooled in the “rational” tradition – enjoy something like a common ground with the people we are trying to understand. And one area of striking

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commonality, improbable as it may appear at first, is the *New York Times* bestseller *Care of the Soul*, by Thomas Moore, a psychoanalyst and cultural critic. As Moore's title openly acknowledges, he stands in the debt of Michel Foucault's *The Care of the Self*. In addition to drawing repeatedly on Foucault, Moore makes use of a wide range of figures from "our" academic canon – Plato, Sophocles, Ovid, Augustine, Pico and Ficino, Goethe, Novalis, Keats, and even Oscar Wilde. Moore knows Latin and some Greek, and like a critic or a theorist in English studies today, he sees his task as teaching people how to read the world – a "hermeneutics," as he calls it, "of experience" in the service of a *techne tou bio*, a "craft of life," another idea taken from Foucault (Moore, *Care* 47, xvii; Foucault, *Self* 43-45).

But Moore sounds Foucauldian in another way, since he has come to think about knowledge primarily as something people *use* rather than as something *known* – and this convergence I find remarkable, given the academy's assumptions about the unreflecting "ordinary" citizen, the kind of person who might buy Moore's book. What seems so persuasive to Moore's many millions of readers outside the academy is precisely what those of us on the inside find compelling in Foucault: a suspicion that the West's commitment to reason has itself become irrational, producing new forms of regimentation in the name of progress and the general welfare. One might conjecture that American grassroots pragmatism paved the way for this sensibility, since we have always had a certain skepticism about philosophy in the grand European style. But one also senses in American life today a free-floating disaffection with "experts" of every sort – and, more broadly, with the institutions that these experts represent. As study after study has verified, the professions enjoy high *status* but also quite low levels of popular *respect*. The high status of the professions, in other words, does not testify to their legitimacy in the eyes of most citizens, but to the very opposite. Doctors are overpaid; lawyers are crooked; politicians are liars; media workers are biased – these stereotypes reflect a profound uneasiness, not only with the individuals who happen to play these privileged roles, but also with a social order in which knowledge itself operates to accentuate status differences and rigidify unequal power relations.

Like Foucault, Moore wants to promote alternative knowledges that will better serve the people now excluded from the game. While his purpose is not to abolish specialization, we can understand his work as an effort to recast social life in ways conducive to a greater degree of public participation. And like Foucault, as well, he understands that the emergence of these "alternative knowledges" begins, not with critique, as many intellectuals now presuppose, but with the search for alternative ways of

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life. The later Foucault's emphasis on the importance of a *techne tou bio*, the artful shaping of everyday experience, might at first glance seem to signal a turn away from his earlier concern with relations of social power; and, by extension, Moore's use of Foucault's terminology could be taken to confirm the charge, made by some of Foucault's critics, that he had given himself over at the end of his career to the allure of the "California lifestyle" (Dreyfus 245). But Foucault in his late work attends so scrupulously to "the care of self" because he understands, in the Nietzschean tradition, that knowledge is finally just an alibi that enables us to live as we want, or as we need. Moore might never put it quite so bluntly as I have just now in calling knowledge "an alibi," yet the question that he poses is the same one Nietzsche posed: not "What is truth?" but instead "How should we live?" (*Care* 296).

These concerns and commitments identify Moore as "one of us" in quite important ways, but the differences are as instructive, I think, as the numerous similarities. While noting his debt to Foucault early on, Moore takes care to underscore a crucial distinction as well, because Moore is decidedly not a Nietzschean:

The word *self* implies an ego project. Soul is nothing like ego. Even the Jungian idea of Self, carefully defined as a blend of conscious understanding and unconscious influences, is still very personal and too human in contrast to the soul. Soul is the font of who we are, and yet it is far beyond our capacity to devise or control. (*Care* xviii)

For Foucault, of course, the soul is not the "font of who we are"; it is the voice of society inside our heads, as he makes plain in *Discipline and Punish*. But Moore employs the term "soul" in a different way, to define those particular sources of the self – if I can take a term from Charles Taylor – that are strong enough or deep enough to help us resist the assault of a corrupting socialization. And unlike Foucault, Moore suggests that there is not a single "order of discourse," within which we are condemned to hang like spiders in the webs of our own spinning. For Moore, instead, there are *two* distinctive orders and these two orders are at war – the first created in opposition to the nature of things for the purpose of domination, the second fashioned through a dialogue with the world in the pursuit of cooperation and happiness. While Foucault advocates the production of counter-knowledges that mimic and undo authority, Moore argues for what he calls "care," which is not just another knowledge, even a subversive one.

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As Moore understands it, the term “care” describes a condition or outlook that becomes possible when we voluntarily forsake the will to power, since the source of genuine care – genuine connection to the world – does not lie in what we consciously want, but in a collective unconscious which speaks for and from the body through the interior language of myth (*Care* xvii).

The interior language of myth. How long has it been since English studies could find this idea believable? – so long, I suspect, that we may fail to recognize its primary inspiration, Carl Jung. Like Freud, who survives among us in the attenuated form that Lacan has passed on, Jung understood the “inner life” as a distinctly *mythic* realm, midway between consciousness and the unconscious, and between the subjective and the communal. As Moore says, “Myth reaches beyond the personal to express an imagery reflective of archetype[s] that shape every human life” (*Care* 220). But Jung departs from Freud, and even more from Lacan, in his account of myth as a *somatic* memory of humankind’s interactions with the natural world. And here, in this turn to the body, Moore has a second precursor, Norman O. Brown, who observes in a passage that Moore quotes several times, “What is always speaking silently . . . is the body. . . . The true meanings of words are bodily meanings, carnal knowledge; and the bodily meanings are unspoken meanings” (*Care* 175, 309). The care of the soul begins, in other words, with the sacralization of everyday life at its most immediate and sensuous – and in this search for transcendence by means of the mundane we can hear one more voice, Paul Tillich’s, a third major influence on Moore and on the new religions generally (Moore, *Care* 213; Keen 1-2, 89-90).

While it is true that Moore holds Foucault in high regard, his *real* loyalties lie with Jung, Brown, and Tillich, whose temporal distance from us is as important as their distance from us in outlook. One way to understand the movement that Moore represents is to see it as a resurgence of a sensibility defeated first in the churches by the religious right, and later, in the academy, by the advent of “French theory” and the waning of “myth criticism,” which survives outside our institution in the enormously popular output of the late Joseph Campbell, a favorite target of poststructuralist critique. But even those new-religion practitioners unfamiliar with Jung or Brown – Pentecostal or charismatic Christians, for example, who are not to be confused with fundamentalists – share a commitment to experience as potentially redemptive. If we asked them to justify rituals like taking up serpents and the laying on of hands, the Pentecostals would emphatically accept the judgment of one “New Age” writer, Sam Keen, that “Mainstream

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religion in America" has become a distinctly "out-of-body" affair (Keen 141; Droogers 33).

Even more than the emphasis on the "everyday sacred," this attention to the body – this "somatic turn," as Douglas Robinson calls it – has engendered an unprecedented change (Robinson 3-15; Keen 76). If there is any concern that nearly all the new-religion writers share, it is the search for "technologies" of the body that produce a heightened sense of connection to other people, the world, and, in some cases, God. Moore describes that search using Foucauldian terms while adding some important reservations, but for people like Deepak Chopra and Jon Kabat-Zinn, Foucault would seem too fully an idealist, strange as that judgment may sound, for his thinking about the body to play a role in their work. While both Chopra and Kabat-Zinn have been trained in traditional Western health professions – Chopra as an endocrinologist, Kabat-Zinn as a psychologist – their use of non-Western traditions permits them to theorize the body in ways that remain all but impossible in the academy, dominated as our discourses are by language-centered semiotic paradigms. Of course, poststructuralism has traveled some distance from Derrida's infamous dictum, "There is nothing outside the text." Theorists like Donna Haraway now argue for what she calls "the corporeality" of their approach. But they still insist that the body is available to us only as a "figure," an "artifact," a "displacement" that "cannot pre-exist its construction" (Haraway 297). For Haraway, the body is still an "effect" of social structures established and sustained by signs and codes, and by institutional power. But Chopra understands the body as capable of "talking back to language, and he regards illness as a consequence of our refusal to listen to these wordless communications (*Return* 86-102; *Creating* 167-205). Precisely because the ayurvedic tradition of India sees illness as a product of the discrepancy between culture and nature, it continually seeks to refashion the first in accordance with the second. A poststructuralist might counter, quite predictably, that ayurvedic medicine is itself culturally determined through and through – and quite different in its particulars from, say, the nature-centered therapies devised by the ancient Taoists of China. But the *popular* response to such obvious discrepancies obeys a different logic, one that is syncretic and pragmatic rather than analytic and deconstructive. Far from concluding that the body is cultural all the way down," to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, many Americans respond to the diversity of healing traditions by concluding that every tradition makes some degree of pragmatic sense, and that the differences testify to the *limitations* of culture and the *primacy* of nature. It is this syncretic pragmatism that allows Chopra to

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blend insights from Indian tradition with those from China, Islam, and the Christian West.

To see the body in this peculiar fashion – as the source of a truth that discursive intellect can never do more than approximate – is to turn one's back on much of Europe's dominant idealist tradition. Although exceptions certainly come to mind – such as the medieval Christian mystics and the eighteenth-century Hasidim – the founders of Western thought from Plato on have typically described the task of culture as the suppression, discipline, or transcendence of the body. But the changing perception of the body today also breaks with our more recent history, in that people writing for mass readerships appear to have lost their confidence in what we might call "textuality," the belief that the act of reading, in and of itself, can transform our lived relations to the world. While this belief in reading as an inner discipline is at least as old as Augustine, who virtually *invented* it for the West, it has persisted, in various secular forms, despite the Enlightenment's turn to "objectivity" and the modernist-progressivist assault on private life generally (Stock 248-78). However radical some post-structuralists may sound when celebrating the absence of foundations or the inexhaustibility of subject positions, they typically remain committed to a Freudian variant of this ancient textualist paradigm: yes, the body is animated by biological "drives," but language and culture – in other words, "the text" – give order to chaos of the body itself. We should never forget that Freud attributed neurosis to our *misreadings* of events, or that the corrective he devised was a text-centered practice, "the talking cure," by means of which internalized contradictions could be reinterpreted and consequently "resolved." But the talking cure, with its emphasis on the retelling one's story in a more truthful way, no longer makes sense if one has ceased to think of language or culture as the key to one's experience, its maker, its master, and its judge.

Perhaps the best example of this departure from textuality is the therapeutic method developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a Buddhist lay practitioner. In contrast to the Freudian legacy, Kabat-Zinn's approach does not aim at reinterpreting the past by uncovering repressed contradictions, but instead undertakes to undo and reconstruct habitual patterns of behavior in the present, from one moment to the next. If the past belongs to psychoanalysis, so to speak, then the present moment falls to the discipline that Buddhists like Kabat-Zinn refer to as the cultivation of "mindfulness" (*vipassana*) (Kabat-Zinn 103-126; also Chopra, *Creating* 181-84). To some degree, this departure from traditional Freudian analysis reflects the nature of Kabat-Zinn's specific clientele, who are usually people racked by physical pain rather than by problems "in the head." But Kabat-Zinn's approach to

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therapy would appear to presuppose that even the problems in our heads have their sources in our bodily dispositions.

The practice of traditional psychotherapy requires that both analyst and patient learn to treat experience as “text,” as a narrative pregnant with hidden meaning like the stories told to Oedipus as he tries to lift the mysterious curse on Thebes. But for Kabat-Zinn, therapy involves setting aside the narrative impulse and becoming increasingly attentive to the comportment of the body in its everyday activities. By watching the breath, by noting the mental and physical impressions that arise with each moment, one learns how to *regulate* attention – and how to develop styles of worldly comportment that escape the stranglehold of pain and the fear of pain. In *samadhi*, a state of wordless and impersonal concentration, pain recedes into the background, like a voice once shrill and deafening but now reduced to a quiet murmur. At the same time, people in *samadhi* no longer see the events unfolding around them as moments in a linear progression that may bring more pain or else the promise of some absolute cessation. Rather, each moment is simply “now,” within a cycle of endlessly returning nows. The point is not to escape time or to follow it backward like Ariadne’s thread; instead, one strives to maintain the rhythm of *samadhi* itself, returning over and over to the present (Kabat-Zinn 18-21).

It seems to me that this reorientation, a shift away from words and signs to unfolding sensation, may represent the great divide between the post-modern era and its possible, “New Age,” successor. But so completely has textualism dominated our thinking in the academy that we have forgotten, if we ever knew, that “reading” the world as if it were a text is only one of many possible ways to make sense of experience. And far from constituting a transcultural universal, the mode of worldly comportment we call “reading” may seem real and useful only under conditions now endangered. One can hardly imagine that reading would enjoy such preeminence in the West if supporting developments – the printing press, for example – had never occurred. But the culture of reading requires other things as well, all of which have become rarities: relative quiet, a wealth of leisure time, a supportive circle of fellow readers. The act of reading also entails a distinctive state of mind – a state of patient, ambling curiosity – that many people today may find unfamiliar and sometimes quite difficult to achieve for long stretches of time. Reading demands something else, however, that may be its most important attribute: a willingness to tolerate deliberate alienation – a suspension of the “now” that makes reading the very opposite of mindfulness meditation. As many observers have noted, to read is to accept a special kind of loneliness, and such a loneliness may seem distasteful, even

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frightening, to those who lack a solid sense of the world and of one's own place within it. It was surely no accident, after all, that the premodern fashioners of modern literacy were medieval monks, Renaissance aristocrats, and the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie, three groups unusually secure in their appointed roles. But now, with the coming of postmodernity, the world looks less and less like a readable text. With the emergence of mass communications and the proliferation of multiple codes and signs, often incongruously juxtaposed and sometimes in fierce competition, everyone must feel a certain sense of groundlessness. And under these circumstances, more than a few of our fellow citizens may recoil from the alienation produced by extended reading, especially when it no longer transports us to certainty, as our Enlightenment forerunners believed, but only to a seemingly endless regress of free-floating positions and perspectives. When academic interpretation has become a labor of Sisyphus, who can blame people for turning to TV and the movies, which at least promise the simulation of contact with the sensuous world? Yet the somatic turn has not led to the final disenchantment of reading. When Moore speaks of reading as a hermeneutics of experience, we might say that he is trying to rectify the problem by restoring a bodily dimension (*Re-enchantment* 248-57). What he has in mind is much less like postmodern textual practices, which uncouple text and world, than their medieval counterparts – when words were like “grapes” to be “eaten and chewed” (Illich 50, 58).

THE POLITICS OF LIGHT: TRUTH AFTER TEXTUALITY

A man with a doctrine doesn't stand a chance against a
man with an experience.
– Pentecostal saying (Cox 312)

While books remain the principal medium for much of the new religious sensibility, the status of the word has changed, and with it, the character of truth. Once the ties between text and life-world are cut, as they have been in postmodernity, the insights provided by reading may lose their pertinence. The very idea of a “sign” or a “code” implies the existence of something other than a sign or code – the much maligned “signified” in the argot of French theory. But in a world of socially constructed language games, where “truth” gets defined in any way a community elects to define it, how is one to choose which community deserves one's assent? Is it good, for example, to think of oneself as essentially “a woman”? Clearly, the writers on gender disagree. Does it make sense to seek out one's “true self” or is

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the very idea of a self an illusion of bourgeois morality? Once again, the answers given by those who claim to know authoritatively fall on every side of the issue.

As the signified keeps receding from view, screened off by an endless variety of perspectives, people may feel the need to reach *beneath* the level of signs and codes, and it is this need that might explain the current flourishing of religious fundamentalisms. But the new religions make their journey to truth by a different path than the fundamentalists do – not through a nostalgic return to the “right reading,” but through practices that range from simple prayer and visualization to yoga and possession by the Holy Spirit. The truth produced by these practices, however, has less in common with the “truth” of philosophy or theology than it does with the knowledge made by scientists, since its merit lies not its propositional character – in claims reached by a purely deductive reason – but in its capacity to produce real-world results – in the self and in one’s relation to others. At least for those who follow the new religions, truth of this kind enables one to act: it frees one from ambivalence and so produces health as well as wisdom, at least ideally.

Yet the pursuit of such a truth paradoxically returns its pursuers to an older, premodern kind of knowledge. Knowledge in the modern sense separates the object and the observer from the larger world that contains them both. We say, for example, that we “know something” when it stands out vividly as a thing-in-itself, amenable to an analysis designed to expose the object’s internal logic – its parts. To know a poem, for instance, is to know how it is “put together,” and the same might be said of knowing a flower or a style of architecture. But the word “knowing” may also denote a kind of fusion, as in the King James Bible: a collapse of the boundary between thou and that. To know a poem in this sense is to see a world “through it,” so that the world, far from receding, becomes intensely present as a whole, and as a part of one’s own self-perception, memory, affect, and so on. This kind of truth *feels* true, and it feels true in a special way – by dissolving the knower’s sense of isolation. Precisely because such a knowledge extracts the observer from the grip of discriminating judgment, it runs the risk of appearing useless and purely fanciful – just as alleged by early empiricists like Descartes and Bacon – but this older path to truth offers something that our textualist knowledge cannot reliably provide: an experiential solution to the problem of multiple paradigms, which ordinarily intensify our alienation, and it does so without resorting to the authoritarian ideal of a single truth applicable to everyone.

Such a knowledge, as I say, can never be a knowledge about specific

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things; rather, it restores the *awareness of context* that makes it possible to see how specific things fit together. And as people in the West have recognized intermittently at least since the time of Plotinus, “light” may be the best metaphor to describe the intimation of this coherence within apparent incoherence, a coherence which has no qualities of its own but which makes visible the qualities of everything else. Precisely because that sense of immanence still remains so distant from our daily lives in the modern world – precisely because we experience the absence of coherence so often and so painfully – light has resurfaced as a “root metaphor” in the new discourse of religion, cutting right across denominational lines (Turner 166-230). Among those inspired most directly by Christian tradition, however, the experience of light also assumes the form of a direct encounter with a “personal God.”

In *Embraced by the Light*, for example, which has sold three million copies so far, Betty Eadie describes her encounter with God after a post-partum hemorrhage caused her heart to stop while she lay unattended in her hospital bed:

I saw a pinpoint of light in the distance. The black mass around me began to take on more of the shape of a tunnel, and I felt myself traveling through it at an ever greater speed, rushing toward the light. . . . As I got closer the light became brilliant – brilliant beyond any description, far more brilliant than the sun. (40)

And at the center of the light, Eadie saw the figure of Christ:

I felt his light blending into mine, literally, and I felt my light being drawn to his. It was as if there were two lamps in a room, both shining, their light merging together. . . . It was the most unconditional love I have ever felt, and as I saw his arms open to receive me I went to him and received his complete embrace and said over and over, “I’m home. I’m home.” (41)

In a sense, there is nothing new about Eadie’s revelation. Thanks to extensive media coverage, many millions of Americans are familiar with near-death experiences of the kind that she describes. But Eadie’s revelation is distinctive in a way it might be easy to overlook, since she is no Mohammed or Joseph Smith: she has *a* message but is not *the* messenger. Again and again in many subtle details, Eadie stresses the ordinariness of

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her life, neither unusually good nor unusually bad.

Eadie's heaven seems remarkably ordinary too, and her Jesus talks to her because, it seems, he will talk gladly to anyone. As she describes him, Jesus is not at all the wrathful judge at the end of time, but a gentle and friendly older brother. When her excitement overwhelms her, for example, he laughingly tells her to slow down. But Eadie's vision is distinctive in yet another way. Her most urgent questions are concerned with how to manage life from day to day rather than with the fate of her soul after death. And this concern with the proper way to live culminates in a question about the diversity of religious beliefs. "I wanted," she writes, "to know why there were so many churches in the world":

The answer came to me with the purest of understanding. Each of us, I was told, is at a different level of spiritual development. . . . Each person is therefore prepared for a different level of spiritual knowledge. All religions upon the earth are necessary because there are people who need what they teach Having received this knowledge, I knew that we have no right to criticize any church or religion in any way. (45-46)

Eadie's concern with the diversity of sacred knowledges is no accident. The daughter of a white father and a Lakota mother, she was raised on the Rosebud Reservation and her vision of the afterlife may owe as much to Lakota shamanism – the same tradition that produced Black Elk – as it does to Western theology. And like the intensely eclectic Black Elk, Eadie seems quite prepared to modify Christian beliefs if such revisions seem appropriate to her, as they do when she discovers that the Father and the Son are not "one being" as she had been taught. Yet the most striking feature of her revelations is not their particular content, but their authorization by the testimony of her own experience, possibly another inheritance from Lakota traditions.

Eadie's account may remind us of dream narratives from other times and places – if not the visions of Black Elk then perhaps those of Julian of Norwich – but we still need to ask what it means that she should tell such a story now, speaking from the very heart of postmodernity. Here again, a return to Foucault may help, since one has only to compare Eadie's account with Foucault's celebrated reading of "Las Meninas" at the start of *The Order of Things*, where he represents the painting as an allegory of our phenomenological situation today. As every graduate student knows, "Las

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Meninas" shows Velazquez himself at work on a painting of the wife and children of Philip IV, a canvas that we as viewers cannot see, while the image of the King surveys the whole entourage – looking down on us as well – from a mirror positioned near the center of the scene. What fascinates Foucault about the painting is the fragmentation of perspectives, the invisibility of the artist's canvas, and the power relations that this play of perspectives makes possible. While Foucault's reading of "Las Meninas" brilliantly evokes the lived experience of people in the West since the Enlightenment, it seems to me that Eadie's account is not premodern, a throwback to "primitive" modes of experience, but postmodern in a more radical sense than that term ordinarily signifies – so radical, in fact, that our poststructuralist paradigms may not be up to the job. Like all people in our time, Eadie recognizes the multiplicity of perspectives or positions, but she may have found – experientially – what many poststructuralists have not: a way out of the endless hall of mirrors.

We might say that in the presence of multiple perspectives, Eadie shifts her attention from an exterior to an interior "plane of visibility." And on this plane, the vertiginous multiplicity of viewers and positions, subjects and objects, resolves itself into a "primal" dyad, an "I" and "Thou" whose mutual recognition erases the boundary between them. Rather than explain this shift of planes in psychoanalytic terms as a wish-fulfilling fantasy or a regression to childhood, we might think of it instead as a cognitive shift, an *intensification of focus* on the experience of separation itself. The "interior" plane that Eadie explores is not apart from the "exterior" world, but deeply within it, though unnoticed by everyday awareness. In a state somewhere between consciousness and the unconscious – the state Moore associates with "soul" – Eadie observes the split between self and world "up close," without distractions and without wandering, as Foucault does, from one moment of alienation to the next. Although she might not explain her insight as I have explained it here, Eadie discovers a unity underlying the subject/object split, a unity that she describes as an outpouring of light and unconditional love.

The truth that Eadie discovers is a truth about relations – about how things fit together to make up the world – and it calls not only for a new epistemology but also for a new ethics. If Foucault's *oeuvre* can be seen as typical of poststructuralism in general, then we might agree that people working within that tradition regard all claims to unity or wholeness as repressive impositions of "sameness" on an "unruly" diversity of perspectives. But the unity that Eadie witnesses actually requires diversity. "God" has "decreed" it: as Jesus tells her, *all* the different churches teach the truth.

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For Eadie and those who accept her testimony, the appropriate response to difference is neither a “foundationalist” nostalgia for agreement nor a transgressive overturning of categories, but the search for an underlying “family resemblance.” While “difference” has become the academy’s highest good, the new religions value *pluralism*, which Moore contrasts to the rigidity of fundamentalist thinking. “From the point of view of soul,” he writes, “the many churches and innumerable understandings of Christianity are its richness, while any attempt to make all churches one” is “a threat to the very life of the religion” (*Care* 235-36). This emphasis on the relative or proximate character of attempts to describe a reality beyond words goes hand in hand with a commitment to personal freedom in the pursuit of religious insight, and also with a utopian vision based on tolerance and mutuality. But such a community of mutual tolerance, at least as many of these writers conceive it, is fundamentally incompatible with the competitive, normalizing ethos of the marketplace. Moore, for example, celebrates the ideal of “monastic poverty,” which he defines “not as a scarcity of money and property but rather as ‘common ownership’” (*Care* 90). In her collection of prayers, *Illuminata*, Williamson insists that on this earth “Our primary work . . . is to love and forgive. Our secondary work is worldly employment” (187). And in *Hymns to an Unknown God*, Sam Keen proposes a somewhat broader program of resistance to the logic of capitalism. His program includes repudiating nationalism, shrinking the chasm between the rich and the poor through progressive taxation, reducing the number of hours worked each week to create more jobs while expanding leisure time, and developing forms of manufacturing less destructive to the environment (239-42). This is clearly not the religion of T. S. Eliot, but it is not just pseudo-religion either, as detractors of the “New Age” faiths commonly imply.

The term “New Age” is, of course, a disparagement, yet as I started to suspect at the *Santuario*, we *are* entering a new age. Like myself, the people around me under the cottonwood trees belonged to a cosmopolitan society, a multiverse of religions and realities, each persuasive and sustaining to its believers. In a world subject to a single rationality, if such a world has ever existed, the line between truth and falsity will be clear for most people most of the time. But in a world defined by multiple rationalities, no single paradigm will seem adequate to the continuous encounter with diversity. I may hear on the radio, for instance, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the son of God and redeemer of sinful humankind, but I may also learn, perhaps from Bill Moyers on TV, that the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, attained enlightenment six centuries before the birth of Jesus and taught

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that everyone could undergo the same experience. In the face of these divergent claims, which arise from two very different paradigms, I may adopt the postmodernist strategy of placing all beliefs without exception *sous rature*, crossing out the Buddha, so to speak, and crossing out the Christ. Or I can spend the freshest hours of every day “interrogating” the relations of power implied by the *Gospel of St. Mark* or the *Lankavatara Sutra*. Of course, both of these responses, if mistaken for ends instead of means, presuppose that alienation is our inescapable fate, and not only alienation but something even worse. Pressed to explain his understanding of social life, Foucault is supposed to have described it once as “a war of everyone against everyone else.” Other theorists have responded with less violence to the diversity of perspectives, as Michael Taussig does when he takes refuge in a “mimetic excess” that frees up every signifier for an interminable series of appropriations (250-55). But to appropriate the words and images of our various others is hardly the same thing as sharing worlds and sharing lives, and so Taussig’s is not the response preferred by people like Moore and Williamson. For them, a more compassionate and useful response to difference is a synthetic exercise of imagination. The point is not to decide who was right, the Buddha or the Christ, or to see the real itself as a simulacrum, but to construct a way of living inclusive enough to accommodate *both* claims as truth.

This is, I believe, the cultural logic at work in best-selling books like John Butcher’s *The Tao of Jesus* and Marianne Williamson’s *Illuminata*. As its title openly acknowledges, *The Tao* attempts to demonstrate the unity beneath two ostensibly opposed religious paradigms – Christianity and the Taoist way of China – so opposed that most of us would probably say the project could hardly be less promising. The legendary founders of Taoism, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, understood the noumenal as an impersonal Way rather than as a personal God. Instead of valorizing the struggle to lead an ethical life in Old Testament prophetic tradition, they repudiate thinking in terms of right and wrong as inherently destructive. And whereas Jews and Christians have traditionally viewed the natural world with distaste or, at times, even outright hatred – Jesus encounters Satan in the wilderness, don’t forget – the Taoists want a return to “original nature,” which is not just trees and birds but also the primordial ontological state.

One might endlessly continue listing differences of this kind, or one might conclude, with Paul Ricoeur, that writers like the author of *The Tao of Jesus* do great violence to both Taoism and Christianity (274-78). To substitute “Tao” for “God,” after all, is to represent God in a radically altered way: as the formlessness behind all form, the emptiness that makes presence

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possible – not the primordial “I AM” of Genesis but the primordial “I am Not.” Yet this response, we might say, is a product of the older, textualist regime, presupposing as it does that beliefs exist within isolated, incommensurable “systems.” For better or worse, however, ideas are endowed with this airtight self-containment only in the pages of intellectual history, from which the real complexity of motives and actions gets excluded at the outset. In reality, the meaning of the text never lies within the text itself, but emerges from the interpreter’s relations to the world. This is why, of course, both slave-holders and abolitionists could cite the same Bible with perfect honesty in defense of their respective positions. And it is why, in our time, no scholarly reading can ever be definitive, regardless of how closely it attends to the nuances of words, or to the historical “conjunctures” which the text supposedly expresses.

The appeal to discrete “belief systems” is not only a rhetorical strategy designed to privilege a single way of reading, it is also nostalgic for a world that has already passed. Christianity and Buddhism, the Taoist way and Islam – these are now mixed together in a single life-world along with democracy, science, Marxist thinking, deconstruction and Darwin, and we can scarcely help but recognize that their values and terms have entered into universal circulation. Simply to learn the definition of “Tao” is already to be changed – is already to inhabit a world where the idea must somehow find a meaningful place. While poststructuralists have correctly understood that encounters among cultures are often “relativizing,” they have generally failed to understand that the “relativity” of “incommensurable” paradigms cannot remain a permanent condition: their view, too, is an illusion of the scholar’s training – the neat divisions of academic labor and the card catalog, which owe far less to the process of understanding than to the logistics of storing and retrieving information.

Syncretism violates the logic of the library, but it makes sense as an ethics of engagement with the “Other” when alternative forms of life have placed in doubt one’s own beliefs. To praise, as Butcher does, “the Tao” that “becomes flesh and dwells among us” is to not to overturn the Gospel, but to renew its *inner* dimension through the encounter with Chinese tradition. And it would seem that this recovery of a meaningful inner life is the reason many followers of the new religions have embraced a syncretic hermeneutics. If syncretism sanctions all beliefs as potentially true, it also makes each person responsible for creating a private truth, which is true not because it can be universalized – that’s the textualist formula – but because it restores the knower’s sense of connectedness to the world and to others. We might say that critical reason, carried to extremes, evacuates the subject by forcing

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its beliefs into a public domain where they must undergo an ordeal of interminable challenge. Under these conditions, the delicate structures of memory and feeling upon which all belief necessarily rests – even scientific belief – can be torn to pieces so thoroughly that dissociation or “disenchantment” may become habitual. When proponents of the new religion speak of “inner healing,” they are describing a reconstruction of memory and feeling in ways that place belief beyond the reach of public assault, a strategy not at all unreasonable when one acknowledges that every belief is susceptible to deconstruction.

EGALITARIAN INDIVIDUALISM

Groups of men who go into the woods to beat drums make an easy target for those predisposed to think ill of them, but it seems to me that as scholars we should try to understand the social arrangements which have made such conduct increasingly widespread – and, in fact, necessary. For many writers on modernity, at least since C. B. Macpherson, it has become an article of faith that no other society in history so indulges the individual, and in this same spirit, the late Christopher Lasch was only too ready to denigrate all efforts at a “craft of life” as symptoms of a decadent “narcissism.” But other observers, starting with Max Weber, may come closer to the reality when they point out that the modern world has made the self the particular focal point of social control. Surely no society has gone farther than ours in the regimentation of experience. What the first twelve years of schooling leave undone, the media bring to completion, collapsing the fragile wall that divides public image from private life and social status from self-respect.

Within the academy we keep trying to produce a heightened social consciousness by insisting that the subject is nothing more an effect of objective social forces – that the self, in other words, is nothing in itself. But many of our counterparts outside the academy believe that society’s renewal will begin with the creation of selves more flexible, secure, and independent, selves more capable of *resisting* the social forces that we see as determinative. The new religions often share our view that domination in our time takes the form of control over images of ourselves that we unreflectingly internalize. To be real at all, in other words, I must conform to the image of “a beautiful woman,” or a “manly man,” a “good mother,” a “success,” and so on. But our counterparts also understand what we have often overlooked – that in the long run the images themselves matter less than our psychological dependency on the institutions that authorize them.

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While we tend to believe that the best response to an oppressive public image is an energetic critique, the practice of critique may overturn ideas while leaving unchanged more fundamental structures of identification. As we all know, even brilliant social critics can be desperate for approval, and in the theater of political action, quite committed liberators can exploit, manipulate, and even murder the very people they set out to liberate. Those of us committed to critical consciousness have too readily assumed that criticism alone can compensate for relations of power that make it impossible to think or say certain things in public forums where the wrong sorts of speech often carry enormous penalties – the high regard of one's colleagues, for example, or the possibility of publication in, say, a prestigious journal. Nor, it seems me, have we given much thought to the mechanisms of “inner censorship” – if I can use the language of the new religions.

If equality is our concern, and if the minimum requirement for a relation of equality is the power to say “no” to the other without fear of retaliation, then the making of a “strong” interiority becomes absolutely indispensable. As long as I depend for my self-worth on the powerful, the learned, the wealthy, the famous, and so on – as long as I locate outside my own control whatever I define as the highest good – words like “equality” and “freedom,” “liberation” and “truth” are little more than empty abstractions. And for this reason, a central tenet of the new religions is a return to the idea that “the kingdom of god is within you.” The valorization of the everyday has many dimensions, but the existential and the political seem inextricably related in much of the writing. As J. K. Bailey reasons in *Already on Holy Ground*:

For too long we've reserved the divine presence for a coterie of bishops and cardinals, *sadhus* and gurus, self-appointed preachers and brilliant philosopher-scholars – as if they were the guardians of *our* religious experience. Perhaps we believed we weren't smart, holy, or committed enough, or we presumed the core of spiritual life lay in some grand future awakening. But in waiting for the blinding light to strike us, we ignored the tiny sparkle of a star in the night sky that could bring joy to the heart and help us to remember the Divine. In experiencing this presence, no event is too minute for our attention. . . . The potential for light is as present with mechanics amid the grease and grime of the neighborhood Amoco station as it is with Zen monks at a monastery in Kyoto. (168-69)

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To people like ourselves, people who have spent whole decades in the labor of acquiring specialized knowledge, this claim is bound to seem a little disturbing, another version of the “easy transcendence” that Mark Edmundson has belittled at the expense of difficulty and genuineness (77-78). Yet it seems to me that difficulty in itself may not be a virtue: instead, it may simply function as another class marker, something like saying “Derrida” without leaning hard on the r’s. At its best, however, “difficulty” can serve the purpose of emancipation by making possible the “exercise of the self” that Foucault commended, an *askesis* that locates value primarily within the self as a means of short-circuiting the psychological dynamics of dependency. But Foucault was not the first person in the West to follow this path: the Stoic tradition in antiquity rests upon the same concept of discipline. To this way of thinking, only a strong self is capable of demonstrating genuine compassion and genuine respect, since only such a self no longer has anything to fear from others, or to gain from their manipulation.

It would be easy to point out, of course, that even the *askesis* of self-fashioning must be socially constructed and that the self is therefore “social” through and through. Yet to adopt “the social” as our master metaphor is not to get to the “real” bottom of things, but only to *choose* a bottom of a certain kind, since bottoms too are inescapably *underdetermined*: they are, in other words, political, if we consider politics as Aristotle did to be the realm of possibility, not necessity. Moore’s truth is no less “true” than Althusser’s “truth,” just as theory’s truth is no less “true” than poetry’s. Each way of engaging with the world produces a different *kind* of recognition on terms that the way itself defines, and so the question posed by the new religions in our time, with their profoundly pragmatic orientation, also has to be a pragmatic one. What advantages do people now perceive in supporting the changes I have described at length here, and what social interests can explain their defection en masse from the culture of text?

The question, as I say, is a pragmatic one, but the answer I will give is *political*, though “political” in the deepest sense, not as an allegiance to this “program” or that party, but as an expression of people’s struggle to control as much of their lives as they actually can. Although literacy seems to have some links with the rise of democratic polities, the culture of the text in the modern world is a culture of hierarchy, if only because the masters of the text impose themselves between the reader and the work. And that mediation has become the alibi for the ascendancy of a restrictive but immensely empowered class of specialists: philosophers, historians, critics, and pedagogues. Priesthood and the culture of the text go hand in hand,

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and the waning of the text goes hand in hand with the desire for something better. "The history of the world," writes Marianne Williamson,

is the history of control. . . over masses of people who finally rise up against [that] control. . . . Seizing someone's soul is the ultimate form of control, because without the soul, we are without our love. Without our love, we're without our power. In this sense, we are as controlled a society as has ever existed. . . . [But now] the slaves are beginning to agitate. (12)

The common thread running through all the discourses here is a profound suspicion about any system which divides up the labor of cultural production to preserve a hierarchy. And in this same levelling spirit, Sam Keen takes issue with "the reactionary efforts of Islamic, Jewish, or Christian nations governed by religious authorities [who] threaten the civil liberties, women's rights, and sexual freedoms we have struggled so hard to achieve. . . . I can't go back to traditional religion. Neither can I live within the smog-bound horizon of the secular-progressive faith" (5).

The communities imagined by those who "can't go back" are typically communities of practice – of ritualized communion – rather than communities of dogmatic consensus, and perhaps the most eloquent testimony to this change is the much-debated, much-maligned Million Man March. On that ambiguous occasion, so hard for us in academy to read, Black Muslims and black Christians, and many men of color without any faith at all, gathered to affirm a collective identity against an indifferent and immobilized state, that consummate product of bureaucracy. What mattered most to many of those involved was not Farrakhan's theology, or even his political analysis, but the transformative drama of pilgrimage, which forges bonds of commonality through the practice of the pilgrimage itself (Turner 123-64). For the textualist, the idea of religion without fixed belief seems to be a contradiction. But the power of practice, as the theologian Karen Armstrong has argued and most of us have only begun to learn, is precisely that it remakes the world in ways that belief can appreciate only in part and belatedly, when the *miraculum* – "the wonder" – has already passed (195-96, 377-399).

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FROM THE ART OF LIVING TO LIVING ARTS

I understood that life is lived most fully in the imagination.
 . . . We are sent here . . . to find joy in our creations.
 – Betty Eadie (59)

If religion as a practice may trouble us, the “New Age” has taken a still more alarming turn, though it may ultimately prove to be a miracle in its own way: a turn toward arts as practice, toward the making of art and away from its consumption, critical or otherwise. As we know from the historical record, the idea that a poem or painting exists primarily to be “analyzed” is actually quite recent. English departments, for example, were created to “teach literature” before anyone actually knew what “teaching literature” might concretely involve. Many professors seventy years ago spent their class time as Bliss Perry did, simply reciting the work at hand, along with admiring asides and the necessary oral footnotes. Arguably, the triumph of academic criticism cannot be separated from the essentially administrative role of English studies, which arose to normalize the tastes of the nation (Readings 89-118; Gere 208-47). As the sociologist Eric Livingston alleges, our critical practices serve primarily to preserve qualitative distinctions between the “informed” readings of experts and the “misreadings” of ordinary people, who generally read for pleasure or “life-lessons” (135-46). And as other observers have pointed out, criticism helps preserve the boundary separating lay people from the august ranks of “real writers.”

The rarification of the arts – their sequestration from everyday life and their metamorphosis into objects of abstruse expert consumption – typifies the very essence of disenchanted modernity as Weber described it, and this development corresponds quite closely to other forms of political and social disenfranchisement. But the academy’s appropriation of the arts may have social consequences more important in the long run than even the plummeting rate of voter participation or the widespread dissatisfaction with, say, the public school system. Fundamentally, the lesson of all the arts is the same: ways of seeing, ways of thinking, ways of feeling can be changed, and each of us can change them. The arts, we might say, dramatize the human power of “world making,” to take a phrase from Nelson Goodman, and they do so by freeing the artist from the ordinary constraints of practical feasibility, empirical proof, and ethical uprightness. Once the arts have become nothing more, however, than an object of specialist inquiry, they often cease to teach this crucial lesson and teach instead exactly the opposite: ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling might be changed, but only by exceptional people.

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Like so much that comes out of the new religions, books such as *Writing Down the Bones* and *The Artist's Way* lend themselves to easy dismissals as naive in their account of the making of art. Instead of talking about the conventions of discourse communities or the history of genres, the author of *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg, represents the composing process as an inner discipline on a par with meditation:

In Zen meditation you sit on a cushion called a zafu with your legs crossed, back straight, hands at your knees or in front of you. . . . You face a white wall and watch your breath. No matter what you feel – great tornadoes of anger and resistance, thunderstorms of joy and grief – you continue to sit, legs crossed, back straight, facing the wall. You learn not to be tossed away no matter how great the thought or emotion. That is the discipline: to continue to sit. The same is true in writing. (9)

To us, the naiveté of these observations seems glaringly evident, but because naivety is itself a matter of social positioning, we might ask why we are likely to see Goldberg's observations in this unflattering light. The reasons, of course, are quite complex and reach back at least to the fading influence of romanticism, but institutional factors probably play a more influential part – especially the rise of composition as a field in its own right. Since the appearance of David Bartholomae's essay "Inventing the University," the inner-directed or "expressivist" perspective that Goldberg adopts has become virtually anathema in composition circles. Yet the embarrassment of compositionists, or perhaps I should say, their contempt, may obscure the repressive character of their own social situation. By methodically dismissing as irrelevant the inner experience of writing, compositionists have created a quasi-scientific knowledge – a knowledge of conventions, tropes, and so on – that strengthens their claim to legitimacy. At that same time, however, the formation of this knowledge tacitly affirms their exclusive sovereignty over a process that Goldberg still annoyingly imagines as hers.

It goes without saying that every form of artistic practice involves something like conventions, and that much of learning to be a novelist or a painter is a matter of "technique." Yet many accomplished artists think of technique as the means to a higher, experiential end. In *The Artist's Way*, for example, Julia Cameron fills the margins of her text with the words of distinguished artists and philosophers who comment on art-making as an inner discipline. One of the quotes comes from Jackson Pollock who

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observes, "The painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through," and another comes from Edgar Degas, who insists that "Only when he no longer knows what he is doing does the painter do good things" (155). If we dismiss these claims as self-indulgent or narcissistic, we misrepresent the character of the experience that many artists value, an experience of self-overcoming achieved through an *intensification of subjectivity*. The way in becomes the way out. As Aaron Copland observes in another passage that Cameron cites, "Inspiration may be a form of superconsciousness, or perhaps of subconsciousness – I wouldn't know. But I am sure it is the antithesis of self-consciousness" (14). The experience that Copland identifies here transcends the perspective of isolated individuality through the activity of a synthetic imagination. And Copland is hardly alone in this belief. If the fine arts reveal any overriding tendency in the last half of the twentieth-century, it is in their movement away from the valuing of art as virtuoso object and toward a celebration of art as a process, a form of involvement with the world that anyone can engage in. When composition theorists denigrate "expressivism," they turn their backs on this vital tradition of expressionism. At the same time, they may ignore something even more important, which lies at the very heart of the expressionist tradition: the potential for a radical democratization of cultural life itself.

OPIUM OF THE MASSES?

Although the new religions certainly run the risk of cooptation by the market – as books like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* demonstrate – the same might be said of oppositional thinking in every form. But precisely for this reason, the time has come, perhaps, for us to reconsider the modern and postmodern tendency to denigrate the "inner life." By waging war on "the personal" and deconstructing "experience," left academics a generation ago set out to shatter the enchanted circle of consumerism and lay the groundwork for a new ethos of equality and mutual care, and yet the power of consumer society might be viewed from quite a different angle, not as the apotheosis of individual freedom but as the very opposite:

Today this private space [of "inner freedom"] has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality. Mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual, and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined to the factory. The manifold process of [psychological colonization] seems [now] to be ossified into almost mechan-

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ical reactions. The result is not adjustment, but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with *his* society, and through it, with the society as a whole. (10)

Here the writer suggests that our problem is not too little awareness of “the social” but too much. Despite the appearance of endless freedom, consumer society is, he claims, essentially totalitarian in its expansion of the “realm of necessity” to include those aspects of human life formerly exempt from its logic. In a consumer society, even our *dreams* come to serve “productive” ends. At this point I should confess that the passage I’ve just quoted does not belong to a masterpiece of the New Age, but to the canon of the academic left – and indeed to the one work in that canon which might qualify as a best-seller: Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*, which has gone through twenty-five printings. True, Marcuse saw religion as an obstacle to freedom, but in this rare respect his thinking became ahistorical and undialectical. While at certain times and in certain places religion *has* promoted a cultural logic of self-denial, one might fairly claim that in our time the new religions stand among the least repressive forms of collective interaction. Thanks to people like Durkheim and Freud, we have come to conceive of religion as *essentially* foundational and repressive, when in fact it can play an oppositional role, even a subversive one. Any number of critics, Marx included, have dismissed religion on the grounds of its otherworldliness, but they have failed to understand the varied *uses* of otherworldliness itself – which is not necessarily an autistic response to unpleasant realities, but may also make possible a refusal to accept those representations of the real which are officially held up as incontestable truth. The power of “otherworldliness” is the power to refuse, not only the official reality, but even the terms upon which that reality can be called into question “legitimately.”

Religion confers this power by virtue of its essential liminality, its capacity to expose all truth as partial and relative (and therefore, finally, untrue) by pointing outside of the whole system – to God, heaven, the Tao, the Dharmakaya and so on (Turner 231-71). Liminality makes religion *dangerous*, as Marianna Torgovnick reminds us, and the danger has required, at various moments in the past, elaborate structures for its containment: enormous ecclesiastic hierarchies and armies of dogmaticians (209-219). But these efforts to stabilize liminality entail an irresolvable contradiction, and so the history of religion has always been what it will always be, a history of common practice, not common belief. For similar reasons, every effort to produce a “rational” or “scientific” religion is destined to fail,

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since these efforts set out to eliminate the one thing that believers value most even when they might not describe it in my terms: an *unconditional* freedom, and not from the world but in it.

Once again an insight from the “New Age” may be more truthful than we wish to admit – the insight that the arts share common ground with the kind of experience we think of as religious. It seems to me, in other words, that unless English studies can offer people something like an experience of “unconditional freedom,” we have nothing to offer at all. If a poem or painting is always *only* a product of social forces, an economy of signs, or some unconscious mechanism, then why not simply study sociology or economics? If all we have to show for our reading and writing lives is a chronicle of ensnarements, enslavements, and defeats, then why should anybody tramp so far afield – through, say, the 600 pages of *Moby Dick* – when we can learn the same lessons much more easily from *People* magazine or the movies? In itself, the forms of activity we speak of as “the arts” can be put to countless uses for countless reasons, but we might do well to ask if ideology critique is the best of those uses. Does it seem credible that the millions of years of evolution which have brought forth humankind’s marvelous intelligence have now come to their full flower in our disenchanted age? Was it all for *this*? Or could it be, instead, that disenchantment, the failure of all our narratives, is now impelling us toward the one encounter we have tried for several centuries to avoid, having failed, perhaps, to get it right the first time around: I mean an encounter with the sacred.

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