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A Life of Learning

by

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My giving the Haskins Lecture on "A Life of Learning" to this distinguished assembly surely involves a case of mistaken identity—and my complicity in it. I cannot claim to be among the scholars, the polymaths of yesteryear or today. When I recall the teachers from whom I learnt the most, René Wellek, Henri Peyre, Erich Auerbach, Judah Goldin, or when I look over the list of your past lecturers, I find myself echoing Matthew Arnold at the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse: "And what am I that I am here?"

Scholars in the humanities are often seen as containers of idle or obsolete learning. The press we get is pretty bad, even among those who know us best. George Eliot's *Casaubon* is at least faintly sympathetic, because the author had been in love, or thought she was, with scholarly types like Herbert Spencer. In *Uncle Vanya*, however, Chekhov's Professor is a parasite; and not much more can be said for the mandarins Fritz Ringler portrays in his famous book on the German professorate. The picture darkens with Max Weinreich's *Hitler's Professors*, which details the opportunism of these guardians of culture (not all in the humanities) and their willingness to be ideologically seduced. Talking of seduction,

Professor Unrat of *Blue Angel* fame comes to mind. Today, of course, being involved with chorus girl or model is reserved for true master builders, like Donald Trump.

I am grateful, therefore, that there is an occasion like this, and, despite my opening gambit, that your choice has fallen on a professional amateur. My story, moreover, may not be untypical of a displaced European, immensely glad to be in America, yet unwilling to let go, to melt down, diverse cultural elements, though they have made it impossible for him to concentrate on one, all-subsuming topic—except culture itself.

Yet, without claiming to be a world-citizen, or that this ideal can still be maintained, I have not felt homeless or in exile—perhaps because literature got hold of me so early, as well as a Wordsworthian sense of place that seemed natural rather than national, Biblical rather than parochial. Sky, fields, pools, sheltering trees, the basic benevolence of the English countryside in which I lived as a refugee, surrounded me. When Auerbach wrote, after the war, "the earth itself must now be the scholar's home, it can no longer be the nation," it struck a chord, because my wish for roots was free of a particular national ideology.

I do not recall a voice out of the clouds, saying: Hartman, you are a literary scholar, put all other interests behind you. Nor was I brought up in an intellectually demanding household. A subtle contagion, however, may have come from an awareness that my maternal grandfather, a rabbi and teacher of religion in Frankfurt, who died when I was a year old, had received his doctorate. (His thesis on midrash, I found out eventually, was influenced by the "Wissenschaft des Judentums," the famous nineteenth-century movement aiming to conduct the study of Jewish religion on a secular and scientific basis.) Yet, while I certainly wanted to do well in school, there was always some other influence at work. My curiosity for all kinds of learning mingled with a mystical feeling for the simple fact that I was alive. "I made no vows," Wordsworth writes about his dedication to poetry, "but vows were . . . made for me."

In addition to being plagued by hypervigilance, and a not always

healthy empathy for every living thing, including the down-and-out, there was, early on, a faith in art, especially in a therapeutic story-telling that served me well as a counselor in summer camps, comforting the very young children I had to oversee. The notion of books about books, moreover, meant nothing to me until I entered graduate school and took seminars from René Wellek. There, suddenly, only secondary literature existed; and gradually, perversely, I came to enjoy it as a great vocabulary builder. For in those days I was still a collector of words as of stamps, a potential poet rather than a budding scholar, and lived in a sort of mild, monkish ecstasy of reading everything and trying to square it with my delight in phenomena as such. "Hunting mice is his delight," a ninth-century Irish scholar wrote of his cat Pangur Bán, "Hunting words I sit all night."¹

Entering the precincts of a life of learning was a compromise. I wanted to be a poet, or to respond to what Wordsworth called "The incumbent mystery of sense and soul." I did publish *Akiba's Children*, a small book of verse—but at close to fifty this was a gesture of defeat as much as of defiance. Its title indicated the nature of my compromise: I had funneled my energies into the act of interpretation, and therefore chose Akiba, perhaps the most influential founder of rabbinic exegesis, as nominal father figure. In receding moments of poetic mania I was determined to convert what learning I had into verse. Reviewing contemporary poetry in the late 1950s, I had already protested the prevalent orthodoxy: an aggressively colloquial and demotic speech. With more lofty and erudite models in mind, I thought I could renew a lost high style, if only through parody and pastiche.

There was another competing interest. Indeed, had I the talent, I would have become a painter, not a writer. Alas, as Miss Taffy, our redoubtable Aylesbury Grammar School teacher, made me realize, when she obliged me to spend futile hours drawing an egg or Fido's doghouse, I was hopeless at that kind of imitation. Later my shameful lack of eye-hand coordination was solaced by an ardent affair with photography. I still have snapshots taken with a five dollar Brownie that sported the simplest of mechanisms (no timer, no lens, just a pinhole). If you gauged light and distance perfectly, it yielded surprisingly good pictures. Nothing intervened between you and visual reality: the eyes had to think, fast; and I still enjoy looking at these

stolen images of Kabbalistic figures in Sefad (probably just bearded old men), and raggedy children playing amid the ruins of Berlin or the slums of Naples. After my early displacements, I was comforted by a vital and invariant sense of place that merged figure and ground.

The other way of assuaging visual desire was writing about it. My first attempt at theory, in *The Unmediated Vision*, argued that poetry, especially in the modern period from Wordsworth to Valéry, pitted the other senses, primarily the ear, against the eye by a compensatory dialectic. "Pure Representation," the chapter tracing how symbolic process undoes visual dominance, subverts "O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon," the blinded Samson's cry in Milton's poem. The verse is made to express my own anguish: at excess of sight, of seeing without understanding, and feeling the guilt of a voyeur for not giving back, through some sort of recreative mimesis, the sheer, early delight of sense-experience. "Why was the sight," we also read in Milton, "to such a tender ball as the eye confined?" I remember discovering, near the beginning of my studies, the theological idea of a glorious, raised, and restituted body, every part of it clairvoyant.

Recently the National Gallery in Washington exhibited Vermeer's "The Art of Painting," on loan from Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum. I was struck by the way ambition and the desire for fame, symbolized by a trumpet and a very thick book held by a young woman dressed up as Clio, contrast with the casualness of her pose, and the fact that the painter does not regard us boldly but sits, elegantly accoutered, with his back to the viewer. His model seems distracted by a thought or perhaps the printed sheet on a nearby table: her downcast eyes are almost closed; nor are the eyes of a perhaps eyeless mask on the same table visible.

If the art emblemized by this canvas alludes to a conventional hierarchy placing history painting at the top, it does so transformatively. The painter's brush, tracing Clio's leafy crown, is more like pastoral's "oaten reed" than the "trumpets stern" representing epic endeavors. A wonderful sense of interior space takes over, fostered by genre painting and furthered by a drawn curtain that reveals the scene; we understand that value does not reside in the particular and always partially staged subject-matter but in the inwardness brought to it by

the artist. Attention is focused on the painter's care, as he begins his work by recreating the bluish-green leaves. So aesthetic experience, while distinctly this-worldly, occupies a continuum between the pleasures of a perception "washed in the cleanliness of a remotest heaven/ That has expelled us and our images," to quote Wallace Stevens,² and the mimetic accuracy of pictures like Vermeer's. The downcast eyes, then, might be a contrapuntal allusion to the upcast, ecstatic eyes in religious painting.

Perhaps I turned to writing about reading because I was deprived in younger days of the simultaneously sensuous and intellectual shock great paintings give. Living in a small English village from the age of nine till sixteen, I never had the opportunity of visiting gallery or museum, while well-known poets and essayists, and, through extracurricular reading, novelists like Tolstoy and Virginia Woolf (her *Between the Acts* affected me deeply by its precarious continuity, its cross-cutting and montage-like notations), were available in cheap, Penguin editions. Once settled in the States, I did visit the Museum of Modern Art in New York, but more for its old movies than paintings.

It was not till my Fulbright year, at twenty-two, that I discovered art through the great museums of Paris and the sculptures of such cathedrals as Autun and Vezelay; and it was not till drafted into the army, some three years later, that, during my furloughs, the even intenser experience of Venice, Florence, Rome, and Ravenna made me desperate again. But it was too late to fall in love with this or that artist, this or that style: I was, and have remained, in a promiscuous daze.

Whether the anti-iconic tradition of Judaism also worked on me to favor the literary over the visual arts, I leave aside. But I did sense an order within the disorder or anthologic flow of early rabbinic readings. Bialik, the first great poet writing in modern Hebrew, remarked that the Talmud's intricate architecture was Judaism's equivalent to a vast gothic cathedral. Certainly, the elongated stone presences of cathedral statuary, biblical figures fixed in their testimonial function, have not ceased to admonish me. The hero, Emerson said, is one who is immovably centered. But I still do not know my center amid the

perplexing variety of perspectives yielded by the interpreter's art.

From early on I tried to discover a distinctive logic in each literary work, an exact formal principle that would illuminate its action and so justify its rich difficulty or seeming obscurity. I was impelled to advocate, at the same time, the indeterminacy of literary commentary, or, as Coleridge described Descartes' cogito, its self-determined indetermination. For the problem on the level of theory was that no one had seriously tried to take the historical mass of interpretations that surrounded each work and figure out their convergence or a subsuming kind of truth. Instead, each critic-interpreter jousts selectively with that variorum, claiming to find this or that error, or an overlooked feature in the text.

Given this epistemic difficulty, I was inclined, like Paul de Man, to emphasize the structure of critical reflection itself, and came to feel that it should have a momentum of its own. But here I ran up against contemporary practice, which stressed almost exclusively the explanatory and evaluative function of criticism. Interested in the essay as an insubordinate rather than serviceable genre, and attracted to the more demanding, philosophically based, discourse of Sartre and Blanchot, I wanted to make my interventions both learned and ludic. One hears of passionate pianists who play as if "attacking the instrument." That is what I did to critical prose, seeking to develop an intenser style.

It seemed to me, in those tumultuous late sixties and seventies, that literary criticism was limited by a conversational and journalistic mode that had been an English achievement almost three centuries before, and whose strength was kept up by many nineteenth-century critics, and in our time by such public intellectuals as Edmund Wilson, George Orwell, and Lionel Trilling. Reflective and reportorial in balanced measure, it was still modeled on the familiar essay, as was the opening column in *The New Yorker* (now superseded) that usually began, "A friend writes . . ." The same amiable correspondent had addressed letters to "Mr. Spectator" (often their actual author) in the eighteenth-century periodical of that name.

The friendship style suggested an embryonically democratic ethos, at least in the domain of letters, an ideal equality of writers and readers. Therefore, despite sharp judgements and discriminations, it downplayed the stress of genius, evading the burden—the anxiety of influence, as my colleague Harold Bloom has named it—that affects not just artists but also their audience.

I cannot claim that the sounds I drew from my prose found a welcoming echo. Its punning, its freight of inner quotations, and a type of reading that stuck close to the text, while introducing French theory together with its German sources, was denounced as an offense to good literary manners, or as mandarin, navel-gazing, unduly competitive with, rather than serving, art. Even as nihilistic rather than humanistic: not perhaps deliberately so but, if anything could be worse, blindly so.

What, me, a tenured radical? It is true I was having fun; such essays as "The Interpreter: A Self-Analysis" or "Adam on the Grass with Balsamum" (the latter partly inspired by midrash) filled the boundary-crosser with an exuberance he cannot today recapture. *Mitsingen* (singing along) was not *verboten*. This was also the time when I celebrated Derrida's *Glas* as realizing the Romantic dream of a philosophic work of art and initiating a Thousand and One Nights of interpretive pizzazz. Denis Donoghue, usually a tolerant spirit, wondered aloud whether Hartman's students were writing dithyrambs instead of dissertations.

Yet I never proposed my "afflicted" style as a model. Its protest was directed against the dominance of a conformist critical prose, useful and educative but hardly an everlasting norm. Not everything should have to be cast in the plain style of book review or teaching. Why cannot literary commentators have the kingdom of their own style, like the artist, like the idiosyncratic Spenser who uttered the rebellious phrase I am adapting? Had I known what would develop in the years to come, I might not have been quite so passionate about the inventive character of technical terms, the illuminations of grand theory, and the virtue of a self-conscious response that claimed an integrity of its own, independent of the work of art that provoked it. However, I would still

have advocated a pluralism of styles.

A growing interest in both Jewish and Christian exegesis also played its role. When I started teaching in 1955, Yale College still had policies that restricted the number of Jewish students; and without Judaic studies or any openly Jewish teachers with tenure in the humanities except a very secular philosopher, Paul Weiss, my reading in the tradition was bound to be self-guided. Here and there I did smuggle a poem by Judah Halevi or a Biblical source into my classes. Yet if those years of my first appointment were very lean indeed, the personal study I embarked on, helped by a summer of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary and a semester in Israel, felt liberating.

I was struck by the daring of a multitude of midrashic interpreters, who, secure in their faith, unpacked even the least promising passages of Scripture in a now homely, now mystical and even transgressive way, and anchored everything in the text by puns that modified—or played with—the root meaning of the Hebrew words. This procedure was not just an ingenious exercise of interpretive freedom vis-à-vis an authoritative text; it implied that the Hebrew Bible had originated in a divine voice, now petrified lava, yet bearing traces of its powerful, multivocal source. Contemporary Biblical scholarship may attribute this linguistic richness or contamination to the syncretism of oral traditions, but the great rabbinic readers sound out Scripture by a *participation exégétique* that makes its voices their voice.

A different pleasure came from the personalism of Augustine, whose *Confessions* are interspersed with Scripture verses by which he addresses God in God's own words, or as if these words had been intended for him, so he could give them back fleshed out by his own experience. In general I came to think that, while it was salutary for literary criticism to separate from theological exegesis, it had impoverished itself by rejecting so large a tradition of textual response.

I was also impressed, as I have mentioned, by the intensity of Continental modes of literary-critical thought, and tried to mediate between its major figures and the emerging strength of an American

cultural criticism still far less radical than its own literature.³ On the Continent, studies of Hölderlin and Rousseau, of Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rilke, of Rabelais, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Joyce, challenged not only received ideas on the unity of the work of art but many aspects of western thought itself. Derrida, at the same time, who for nearly a decade found a home in Yale's Comparative Literature Department, expanded the concept of textuality to the point where nothing could be demarcated as "hors d'œuvre" and escape the literary-critical eye. It was uncanny to feel hierarchic boundaries waver until the commentary entered the text—not literally, of course, but in the sense that the over-objectified work became a reflection on its own status, its stability as an object of cognition. The well-wrought urn contained mortal ashes.

Freud's interpretive and speculative vigor had already anticipated this notion of commentary. His recording of dreams did not produce an object with definitive boundaries. To stabilize the dream and make it interpretable, his analyses were sometimes as astonishing in their linguistic and associative flow as the dream-work itself. The commentary entered the text once more, even created a new kind of textuality in the form of the written dream. Saul Lieberman, among the most learned Talmud scholars of our time, confirmed that midrash, or, to be precise, the freer kind called aggadic midrash, might have been inspired by ancient methods of dream interpretation. Still, I was shocked when Bill Wimsatt, a senior colleague at Yale allied with the New Criticism, and whose graduate seminar on the history of poetics was legendary, denounced Harold Bloom and me as "battering the [literary] object."

If I was guilty of battery, it was only vis-à-vis a tendency to fabricate pseudo-historical narratives of literary or critical progress. Reacting in *The Unmediated Vision* to the attempt by the New Critics to bypass many Romantic and nineteenth-century poets, I had myself succumbed to a fabrication. The book's concept of modernity simply displaced the chronological caesura defining literary modernism from the early seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century. Gradually, through my association with Paul de Man, I questioned period terms, especially claims made for "the modern."

Only a portion, in any case, of the iceberg of interpretations is visible in the contemporary, secular era. The greater part, linked to religious sermons, law-finding, and mystical brooding, remains neglected or deliberately ignored by the predominance of an unreflective Enlightenment paradigm. Art itself, moreover, once it had become free-standing, or separated as an object of study from its religious matrix—a feat that had once required Aristotle's brilliant surgery—art itself resists being historicized. "Toward Literary History," the final essay in *Beyond Formalism*, suggested that it was questionable to see literature as the reflex of a highly determined social or political milieu. One had to respect art's *imaginaire*, its projection of a counter-reality, which might include a vision of history but could also create a new distance between words and things. Here Blanchot counted for more than did Sartre.

Over twenty years passed before I was able to relate poetry to politics in a consequent manner. *The Fateful Question of Culture* proposed that if Wordsworth's *imaginaire*, his attempt to envision a modern culture that would not break with a rural sensibility, had taken hold in Continental Europe, the pernicious political exploitation of the gulf between urban and rural, burgher and peasant, might have been avoided.⁴ I had previously tried to bring cultural and literary history together by formal constants like the *genius loci*, a persistent superstition that linked inspiration to specific place and time, at best encouraging the revival of vernacular poetry and at worst literary nationalisms. But the history planned on the basis of that figure and the permutations of a geopolitical "Westerling," a counter-sunwise progress of poetry and liberty, never came about.

A defeat, again; yet even had I succeeded, art's minute particulars would have retained their own way of extruding, of hogging attention. Hermeneutic startlement never dies down. John Crowe Ransom got it right when he said that literature has logical structure and irrelevant texture. A devilish detail is part of art's economy, of a sign-system that produces large effects through micro-material means.

I am both attracted and repelled, therefore, by contemporary overkill, the hallmark of an affluent society that is at once wasteful and caught up in the dream of total restitution. Historicism is only the beginning of this dream. The latest image of restitution actually revives the idea of a clairvoyant body. Robert Taylor, one of the Internet pioneers, evokes a technological phantasm. We could soon be wearing, he predicts, "an unobtrusive device that will record in full color and sound everything that you see or point your head at, or, depending on how many of them you have, everything that's around you. And share it. Every waking and sleeping moment in your life will be recorded. And you will be able to store and retrieve it and do what you will with it."⁵

It would seem to me that we already have world enough, though not time enough, and that the passage from "you will be able to store and retrieve it" to "and do what you will with it" is far more questionable than that easy, consequential "and" suggests. Taylor elides the moral problem of the use to which knowledge will be put, especially in an age of information technology. For what is lacking and difficult to increase is *studium*, the capacity to think and interpret, which discovers the curvature of space or of expression, and accepts that, if "all's oblique," we can never coincide entirely with ourselves, or a presumed identity.

In this technological era, knowledge is fate once more, is the daimon, and the vital issue becomes how we can turn it into ethos or character rather than into more knowledge, more obsession, more consumerism, more spectatorship. A life of learning has little moral weight unless it communicates the life in learning. Two of my guiding spirits in this respect are Goethe and Thoreau. "Every observant glance into the world," Goethe said in his *Farbenlehre*, "has theory in it." And the scientist in Thoreau looks at knowledge acquisition with what can only be called ecological tenderness: ". . . heaven to me consists in a complete communion with the otter nature." "Do not tread on the heels of your experience," he also admonishes himself. "Be impressed without making a minute of it. Poetry puts an interval between the impression and the expression—waits till the seed germinates naturally."

So I come, as you knew I would, to the relation of art and learning. "Poetry," according to Wordsworth, "is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge." Like Goethe and Thoreau he refused to see art and science as enemies. What kind of knowledge is art? And, what kind of learning can we bring to art to illuminate it? Is there today only a hyper-professional field called literary studies, or can we hope for a culture of criticism, despite augmenting burdens of knowledge, including an ever-expanding curriculum? How far are culture and erudition conciliable? The pressure of contextual historical information, as well as the enormous dilation of secondary literature, is potentially disabling rather than inspiring, and may produce a greater divide than ever between scholarly article and performative essay.

B.C., that is, Before Cyberspace, the fear was that a Hegelian increase in self-consciousness would corrode creativity. In the 1950s, with the New Criticism firmly established, there were finicky debates on whether an artist's mind should be so fine that no idea could violate it. For T. S. Eliot, Henry James was the great example of such chastity.⁶ Eliot's notorious thesis on a dissociation of sensibility from thought in early modernity expresses the same worry. By the time of the Romantics, anti-self-consciousness theories were not uncommon and expected art to save what John Stuart Mill called, in reference to Wordsworth, a "culture of the feelings."

My interest in the Romantics was strengthened by a happy accident. While first-year instructors at Yale, Harold Bloom and I were assigned adjoining offices in a basement of Yale's Old Campus. He was finishing the thesis that became *Shelley's Mythmaking*. It made use of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" concept of relationship, also deployed, somewhat differently, in *The Unmediated Vision*. A lasting friendship was formed in those dingy surroundings. We both knew that the Romantic poets were underestimated, although Frederic Pottle, Yale's senior Romanticist, kept the flame alive in his cool, scientific way, while Wellek fought a rear-guard action against Lovejoy's challenge that Romanticism as a period-term was unsustainable. Through Bloom I developed an interest in Blake's revisionary theology and large-scale antinomian deceptions, as well as in Northrop Frye's fertile critical

machine, a blend of Blake, Yeats and Spengler.

What I valued most in the Romantics was that their art surmounted its own anxiety about the recession of art. Could the imagination, always at odds with the world, always seeking autonomy or a world of its own, and now often held to be useless by the scientific spirit of progress, and the utilitarianism of a soon rampant Industrial Revolution—could the imagination still bond with either art or earth, and so avoid solipsism or apocalypticism?

Wordsworth's nature poetry always implicitly bids farewell to nature: "And o, ye fountains, meadows, hills and groves, /Forebode not any severing of our loves!" He describes how the imaginative power was lost or went underground, how it sporadically reared up in its unconditioned strength ("like an unfathered vapor"), and is eventually reconnected through nature poetry to nature, to its rural, everyday habitat. I responded to Wordsworth's early experience of a beauty that had terror in it, his awe at what transpired in the mind of man, the ecological fears besetting him, and the way each poem turns into a haruspication of his era's imaginative health. In short, I hoped to squelch the prejudice that met me at the threshold of my studies: the Romantics were, somehow, great poets, but became children when they tried to think.⁷ Or adolescents:

If you think 'twas philosophy that this did,
I can't help thinking puberty assisted.
(Byron, *Don Juan*)

The prejudice extended to the charge that they could not compete with writers who struggled tough-mindedly to gain or revise a unified world-picture. Blake compared to Dante was a bricoleur; Wordsworth's religion was sentimental and diluted. Matthew Arnold, the source of the judgment that the Romantics "did not know enough," had targeted mainly the English society in which they lived.⁸ But the anti-Romantics, by what my *Criticism in the Wilderness* described as a simplification of the Arnoldian concordat between creative and critical, at once exaggerated Arnold's critique and subordinated the importance he placed on the diffusive, cultural powers of the critical spirit. Unlike Arnold, moreover, they refused to see that a new theology was taking

hold: a theology of the poets. They feared the very thing he reluctantly accepted as a Romantic legacy: that what would remain of religion was its imaginative truth. One nineteenth-century wit reported dreaming of a new Anglicanism, with nine articles of faith and thirty-nine muses.

On another front the New Critics were more percipient. They understood that the weakening of established religion was anointing politics rather than art as the new religion. The critical spirit, however, was powerless to counteract this tendency through its own force alone. Without the support of a long-standing, ingrained world of belief or custom, it could not make criticism into a culture.

There is some affinity between Eliot and Nietzsche on this one point. The latter's sharpest barbs are reserved for what he sarcastically names "Gelehrtenkultur," egg-head culture. It is marked by an abuse of "Historie," the kind of learning that dries up life, and to which Goethe's Faust gives such memorable expression in the drama's long opening kvetch. "The tree of knowledge is not that of life," as Byron's Manfred says more concisely.

Yet the learning to which Nietzsche objected was not a magical or virtuoso quest, it was distinctly modern: the pride of nineteenth-century German scholars whose research was destroying a Eurocentric universal history. Myths of emancipation, cultural progress and national destiny were challenged by historicism's resurrection of the dead, as Michelet described the new, secular science. Historians now revived victims together with victors, and produced a positivistic nightmare of endless, mostly anonymous suffering. For Nietzsche this B.C. information explosion had the potential of reinstating a sterile pity, or another slave revolt, that would result in the opposite of historical redemption. The outcome would surely be a relativism sapping conviction and playing into the hands of a reactionary nationalistic fervor. Carl Schorske, always interested in how culture and politics interact, reveals in his Haskins Lecture how astonished he was to discover that some of the most nationalistic German historians in the Weimar Republic and under the Nazis "justified their doctrinaire nationalism by an explicit philosophical relativism."⁹

Even today the cultural issue with the greatest political fallout is a form of cosmopolitanism, a globalization that provokes an unintended crisis. When world-wide perspectives are felt to endanger rather than benefit local attachments, to result in identity loss or even a skepticism without borders, theories of the organic community return, and even a nationalism that invests metaphors of blood, soil and roots with nostalgia. The growing complexity of a modern economic system with its multiplying intermediaries or bureaucratic machines does not help matters. A new passion for simplicity, immediacy, and inspired action arises.

Though the revival of learning, moreover, produced a remarkable succession of vernacular writers in Europe, this very richness often sparked the feeling that there could be no second such growth. Modern Romanticism confronts this canonical double burden of the Ancients augmented by native classics, as well as a bewildering diversity of gods and myths in our "légende des siècles." Given so much knowledge, and later, with the culture industry, pseudo-knowledge, can the creative still create itself, as Keats declared it must? Blake's phrase "organized innocence" already suggests that, despite the triumph of the mother tongue, the creative must undergo a process of intellectual mediation and emerge as a powerful second immediacy.

I have not talked, so far, about the field of Comparative Literature, or my experience as a teacher. Probably because I dislike short-term polemics and cannot see very far into the future. To list the critical movements I have known would mean to indulge in mock-epic enumeration.

At Queens College and then at Yale I was so immersed in what I used to consider an "unmediated" response to literature that even the New Criticism, fast becoming the reigning orthodoxy, did not affect my work except to strengthen a salutary myopia, that of close reading. Having barely escaped deadly persecution, moreover, I shied away from any attempt to politicize art.

Continental literature, and a basic knowledge of both the Classics and the Hebrew Bible, accompanied my focus on English and American

poetry. I saw that interpretation would always depend on a text-milieu. If that text-milieu is narrow or impoverished, interpretation too will suffer. I had no hesitation helping to found a Literature Major at Yale that kept canonical works in the curriculum but added detective stories, movies and popular fiction generally. The comparison would stimulate rather than suspend the question of literary value.

I enjoy lecturing but prefer seminars because of the chance of hearing unexpected ideas as well as responding in such a way that the random, Brownian motion of participatory comments eventually settles into a more focused pattern. (Distance learning will never duplicate *this* experience.) My teachers at Yale contributed to an open weave of mind. They were so diverse that they would have balanced each other out even had they been more doctrinaire. Almost all in Comparative Literature were émigrés, cosmopolitan by necessity. They did not need, or even want, disciples. (In the English Department, however, a stricter, more evangelical atmosphere prevailed.) Indeed, to get their attention one had often to break through a detachment that today might be resented.¹⁰

Where we relied on the teacher's erudition or enthusiasm, and even forgave poor teaching if one could learn something from the texts presented, today the balance of responsibility has shifted. We are so wary of authority, even when as provisional as in the classroom, that everything tends to be viewed in terms of power-relations. Teachers, therefore, who are less than charismatic cannot escape the pressure to be overly tender in their remarks.¹¹

You would be right to infer from my observations that I believe recent changes in literary studies belong to social history as much as to the history of criticism. I am quite aware, moreover, that change often creeps up on us and endangers even exceptionally dynamic institutions like the North American university. The increasing reliance on student and part-time teaching is a case in point. It has altered our perception that the academic community's "fellowship," beginning with graduate study, is something special. When most decisions are made by a centralized administration, it is no wonder that, especially in a time of job scarcity and distorted salary differences, students in the humanities feel they are employees rather than fellows of the faculty training them.

Unionization becomes, then, a tempting outcome as well as satisfying the need for community.

We are idealistic when we depict the university as a place of community. It does not escape worldly tensions. This holds for the faculty as well. The more distinguished the faculty, the more collegiality may suffer. It was a lack of collegiality—a lack that also jeopardized interdisciplinary work—that led me to organize a group for "Psychoanalysis in the Humanities" and to press for a Humanities Center at Yale. My activities on behalf of Judaic Studies, however, were aimed less at redressing a communal or interdisciplinary need than achieving intellectual equity for a learning-tradition—and a reading-practice indistinguishable from it—as old as Rome and Athens. "Hebrew," Franz Rosenzweig remarked, "knowing no word for 'reading' that does not mean 'learning' as well, has given this, the secret of all literature, away."¹² Whereas Yale in the 1970s could field five Professors of Pagan studies (a.k.a. the Classics) and a similar number on the Christian side of Religious studies, it allowed the equivalent of one professor for the entire history and literature of Judaism.¹³

I come in this way to a final reflection. As I understood better the vitality of German-Jewish thought before the destruction, I began to fantasize what my life would have been had the Holocaust not occurred.¹⁴ I would surely have stayed in Germany and studied directly with many whom I admired: Buber, Cassirer, Panofsky, Adorno, Benjamin, Fromm, Simon, Glatzer, Heschel, Arendt. Though I met Arendt and Heschel (also Scholem¹⁵) in one academic circuit or another, they were already books in exile, rather than part of the original dream-team. My grieving for German-Jewish culture was mainly, in truth, for myself—for having been separated from the life of an imagined community.

It was not an abstract duty of memory, then, but a growing sense of the value of what had been lost that gradually turned me toward the Holocaust. My wife, Renée, though a child survivor of Bergen-Belsen, never insisted on that focus; in fact, she sternly advised me against

becoming too deeply absorbed. And when I helped to establish Yale's Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, I had no inkling that it would lead to scholarly involvement. Indeed, to write about the Holocaust professionally, to do more than honor the witnesses by becoming a secondary witness through the archive project, seemed exploitative. It raised for me the question of what motivates apparently disinterested scholarship. Are we not attracted, like writers of fiction, to the heart of darkness; do we not consume the trauma of others? Or is facing a greater pain than ours the way we manage our own, often desperate awareness of an encompassing social suffering?

I graduated from putting together mission statements that raised funds for the archive, to essays on what I had learned from the survivors, and finally to a consideration, both pedagogical and ethical, of what style of discourse, what always questionable decorum, might do justice to the "study" of trauma and the "teaching" of catastrophic events. I became aware, at the same time, of a continuity between this and certain of my previous concerns. I had long tried to understand the relation between words and psychic wounds, and had put forward a thesis about how we become word-sensitive and cure by words the wound words have made.

Occasional participation, moreover, in survivor interviews, though these were not structured as a dialogue but as a way to free the speech of persons who had undergone terrible things, made me more aware of the act of listening, its enabling potential.¹⁶ As for Wordsworth, did not his memory-work respond to both infantile and adult trauma? He describes the lasting impact of early, sometimes ecstatic, fears, and a later, very deep sense of treachery, of psychic wounding, when Britain goes to war against France and the French revolution betrays itself.

The Holocaust experience is monstrous, unnatural; and a comparison with more common developmental traumas is odious. But the issue of how "internal injury" (the phrase is Wordsworth's own) is overcome, or, specifically, whether man-made disasters like the Holocaust can be worked through by the victimized individual or collective—that question of a possible integration or reconciliation is crucial for today's cultural memory, not only in Germany, South Africa, or the Middle East, but also in this country.

Scholars are, or should be, intellectual witnesses. Hence they too are at risk: our academic hygiene, which often sanitizes art, will not shield us from secondary traumatization when state sponsored, or tolerated, hate crimes are studied. I am still learning how not to turn away from such ethical and emotional demand.

Notes

1

Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 25. I recall strolling about during a conference in Columbus, Ohio, with René Wellek. He still wanted to know about *everything*, even why certain streets were named this or that. By that time my positivistic hunger for all kinds of knowledge had faded. But into the early twenties some emptiness made me devour new words, from English as from other languages. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

2 "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." [\[Back to text.\]](#)

3 An exception: Kenneth Burke's demystifying yet not reductive studies of literary form, his "Thinking of the Body," "symbolic action," and sociological poetics generally. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

4 It was only while writing *The Fateful Question* that I read Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society*. I have mentioned teachers who strengthened my sense of scholarship but I have left out the tonic of great books such as—to name only a few more—Jane Harrison's *Themis*, Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage*, Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl's *Saturn and Melancholy*, Lovejoy's *Great Chain of Being*, Theodor Gaster's *Thespis*, Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Halbwachs' s *Collective Memory*, Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, and E.R. Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. All except the last three were somewhat offside to my direct interests yet had in common a respect for historical/anthropological research without sacrificing an intense vein of speculation. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

⁵ *The New York Times*, December 20, 1999, C38. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

⁶ Eliot gave further expression to his concern with over-consciousness in "From Poe to Valéry." The French poet is chosen precisely because he understood that Leonardo da Vinci's achievement in reconciling theory, science, and painting could no longer be attained. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

⁷ With respect to Wordsworth nothing could be further from the truth, though he was never a formal thinker in the way Coleridge was. It is amazing that the poetic spirit survived in so self-conscious a person; that the natural man, as Coleridge says about his own dejected self, was not stolen away by abstract thought. Shelley's interest in science is well known; and Keats's "Beauty is Truth..." only serves to assuage the "fever" of empathy, of an aspiration to know—to enter imaginatively—the life of other modes of being, that came close to "annihilating" personal identity. As for Blake, his theology fictions are systematic vehicles of abundant satiric as well as inventive energy. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

⁸ "In England of the first quarter of this century there was neither a national glow of life and thought, such as we had in the age of Elizabeth, nor yet a culture and a force of learning and criticism such as were found in Germany. Therefore the creative power wanted, for success in the highest sense, materials and a basis; a thorough interpretation of the world was necessarily denied to it." From "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864). [\[Back to text.\]](#)

⁹ *The Life of Learning*, ed. Douglas Greenberg and Stanley N. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59-60. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

¹⁰ Henri Peyre, though, was a godsend: always personal, witty, encouraging. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

¹¹ Two vignettes concerning then and now. What did I learn from a kind-hearted French professor at Queens except his liking for certain lines of poetry which he punctuated, memorably, by smacking his lips? That is one reminiscence. The other comes from my stint as Director of

the School of Criticism and Theory, where at one time even seating arrangements were challenged. It was claimed that a certain room with a raised platform (or was it raised seats?) was too "authoritarian." A committee had to be appointed to look into the situation. In case I leave the wrong impression, let me add that the intellectual and communal excitement generated by the School, which is still teaching innovative perspectives to younger faculty from this country and abroad, soon dispelled these initial, nervously symbolic, concerns.

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¹² *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1965), 216. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

¹³ This contains a slight exaggeration: the Near-Eastern as well as Judeo-Christian overlap was recognized. The Hebrew Bible in its canonical formation was taught by two distinguished professors from, originally, the Divinity School, while there were slots for Northwest Semitic and Babylonian culture. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

¹⁴ The "covenant" of the Jews with German culture and its religion of *Bildung* has been amply documented; also that women played an equal role in fostering this ideal. Martha Wertheimer, who received a doctorate from the University of Frankfurt in 1919 and disappears in the spring of 1942 when deported to the East, writes as follows to a friend in America, despite her precarious situation: "How impoverished are young people whose mind and soul is not filled with such literary riches [being able to allude in one's letters to Hölderlin's correspondence with Schiller]. You and I can always pronounce an 'Open Sesame' that will unlock the gate, not to a magic cave but to a greater and blessed land, which belongs to us and from which no one can expel us." *In mich ist die große dunkle Ruhe gekommen: Briefe an Siegfried Guggenheim in New York Geschrieben vom 27.5.1939 - 2.9.1941 in Frankfurt am Main* (Fritz Bauer Institut, Frankfurt am Main 1996), 19. My translation. See also for the general picture, Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). [\[Back to text.\]](#)

¹⁵ Gerhardt Scholem had emigrated to Palestine before the Nazi regime came to power. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

¹⁶ It also led me to appreciate why Greek and then neoclassical tragedy tended to keep what Aristotle called *to pathos*, scenes of wounding or killing, off-stage ("obscene"), preferring to report on rather than represent terror directly. The stories of the survivors had tremendous immediacy but also a distance—however fragile—that made them bearable. [\[Back to text.\]](#)

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