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## The Need For Revision: Curriculum, Literature, and the 21st Century

David P. Owen

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## The Need for *Revision*: Curriculum, Literature, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

by

David P. Owen, Jr.

(Under the Direction of John A. Weaver)

### ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that curriculum, especially as it is practiced in high school education, needs *revision*, that literature is the place to start that *revision*, and that literature class itself needs to be *revised* to incorporate a much broader understanding of the texts to be studied so that such work might take place there. This dissertation also recognizes that the work of teaching literature and humanities classes is especially difficult today, and argues that this difficulty has dire ramifications for all teachers and researchers in and of public education, and particularly for the field of curriculum studies. This work argues that the important questions of curriculum studies, such as whose knowledge matters most, or what should be passed from one generation to the next, are important to all students and are best explored by students of all types in public education literature and humanities courses, and so a new emphasis on these courses at all points in the curriculum is needed.

However, for this exploration to remain possible for public education teachers and students, we will need what this study calls *liminal scholars*, doing the work of *revision*; they will need to constantly see how what's going on inside the academy affects what's going on outside, and vice versa, and *revise* public education to suit the new circumstances. In summary, this work says that 21<sup>st</sup>-century America will still need literature class, but literature class will need a good strong dose of 21<sup>st</sup>-century America

as well, and we will need *liminal scholars* of curriculum studies to keep this relationship a healthy one.

The author proposes that with *revision* of the role of literature and the humanities in the curriculum, we can make these classes our great meeting places, the hubs of our secondary public academic world, where people of many walks of life and future fields of study can come together and learn to become *filters* in a complex, dynamic, *feedback-*laden world of many texts, making determinations about what matters most, to whom we should listen, and how these discoveries ought to be expressed and shared with the rest of us.

INDEX WORDS: Curriculum, Literature, Humanities, Revision, Complexity, Filters, Liminal scholars, Feedback, Public education

**The Need for *Revision*: Curriculum, Literature, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

by

David P. Owen, Jr.

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M. A., University of Georgia, 2001

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**The Need for *Revision*: Curriculum, Literature, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

by

David P. Owen, Jr.

Major Professor: John A. Weaver  
Committee: Daniel E. Chapman  
Mary Aswell Doll  
Marla Morris

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DEDICATION

For Courtney, just like everything else.

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## For | Word

When people find out that I teach high school literature, the most common thing they say is, “Why would you want to do that? I couldn’t do what you do.” They don’t mean, of course, that they are impressed with my job—they just think it’s hard, and probably not worth the trouble. Well, I certainly think it *is* worth the trouble, and will spend the rest of this work talking about why. But as for the difficulty of teaching high school literature today: no kidding. People don’t read the texts we assign much, essays seem to get a little worse all the time (certainly the mechanics do), and students will usually confess that they don’t take class seriously unless we happen to study something they like. It is hard, and I can hardly do it, either.

In fact, the difficulty of teaching the word today has dire ramifications for all teachers and researchers in and of public education, and particularly for the field of curriculum studies. For one, whatever the content of the subject matter, we all still do most of our teaching and research work with words, lots of them, and publish those words in scholarly books and journals, precisely when the world around us is reading these kinds of things less and less. Can we really help determine whose knowledge matters most, or what should be passed from one generation to the next, if no one reads our work, or knows what we are talking about—let alone why we are talking about it? Here I am, after all, *writing* page after page about and for people who will, very likely, never *read* them. In fact, the people I want to talk to most don’t read much of anything anymore, let alone works of curriculum theory. The problem is that many people today, particularly young people (roughly in their early 30’s and younger), are used to—literally

and metaphorically—“changing the channel” whenever they lose interest in whatever is before them, just about wherever they go, ever since the technological gadget explosion of the mid-90’s. They don’t necessarily hate books; they just have a lot of options, and we have little time to hook them (ever seen a restless teenager with a remote control?). This is true whether the “text” before them is a television channel, an iPod track, a radio station, a Web site, *or whatever we are trying to teach them at school*. It is also true that some of these “channel-changers” are *teachers* now, not just students. What to do, then? Quit writing books? Quit hoping that people read them?

As an illustration of this problem in curriculum studies and public education, I offer an image from William F. Pinar’s (2007) *Intellectual Advancement Through Disciplinarity*, in which Pinar argues that we need more scholars working specifically on the history and current state of the field of curriculum studies. I think he is right, but I also think we need another kind of scholar as well. Pinar says in his introduction that “disciplinary conversation is hardly held in a sound-proof room,” and that “the sounds of events from outside the field . . . influence what we say to each other and to schoolteachers” (p. xiv). I absolutely agree, but I find those outside “sounds” particularly intriguing, and I think we need to do more than hear muffled traces and rumors of what is going on outside that metaphorical room; in short, I’m worried that if we are not careful, when we want to emerge from the room of our disciplinary studies, we will find the doors locked and the lights off, so to speak. I’m worried that the young students and teachers we want to help will change the channel on us.

To prevent such a thing from happening, I propose a kind of *liminal scholar*, one who works in the windows and doorways of the academy, now at the conference table or

library, now in the hallways, now in the open air of the world “outside the field,” lest those spaces-between where the inside and outside commingle become instead impermeable walls. I, for one, have never felt quite at home in either place; I often wish the world were a little more academic and the academy a little more worldly, and I am sure there are others like me. So, rather than force ourselves into places we do not fit, I propose that some of us make a home of our homelessness, and serve as conduits for the open transit of ideas across academy thresholds. Perhaps if we do this work well enough, we can convince the academy (and the public school) to open its doors a little more and young people to “put down the clicker” every now and then, or at least hand it over and let us do the clicking. These *liminal scholars* will need to do what I call the work of *revision*; they will need to constantly see how what’s going on inside affects what’s going on outside, and vice versa, and *revise* public education to suit the new circumstances.

I would like to begin my own version of this work with why I think we in public education today need our *vision* checked, as it were, when it comes to the place of the humanities and literature in our curriculum, and use as a springboard for that discussion a book by Mary Aswell Doll. The introduction to Doll’s (2000) *Like Letters in Running Water: A Mythopoetics of Curriculum* serves as a sort of defense of the study of the humanities, particularly the works she calls “fiction,” or written texts united by their use and exploration of the imagination. She finds fault with what she perceives as the humanities’ relegation to the role of “stepsister in the academy” (p. xi); she decries the attitude that devalues the study of these arts simply because they might not “fatten the pocketbook” (p. xi); and she laments the sad fact that even when her students admit that they have learned from a literary engagement, they do so reluctantly and immediately

discount the discovery, assuming it to be accidental, or inconsequential, or at least unconnected with the words on the page. Doll insists that adventures in language are not “‘mere’ exercises” (p. xi), that reading literature is not an “‘only’ experience” (p. xi); indeed, she says that “the engagement with fiction (prose, drama, poetry, myth, fairy tale, dream) can be a learning experience of the first order” (p. xi). And she promises us that the aim of her book is to rectify this misunderstanding of the value of fiction to the curriculum.

Doll argues that many of the virtues and benefits specific to fiction are overlooked or mis-quantified by its detractors, perhaps because while in fiction “one learns about living,” it is also true that “the learning is subtle” (p. xi). First and foremost, she seems to trumpet as its defining characteristic that fiction can “revivify” (p. xi) our ailing imaginations, keeping us from completely falling prey to an increasingly literal, glaringly available world. In addition, as our imaginations are stirred by exposure to fiction, so are our societies and consciences shaken by it. We are poked, and prodded, and disturbed by fiction until we must reconsider and possibly reform our views of the world around us and the people with which we must share it; as she says, “when stories are told, one sees differently” (p. xi). And, interestingly, fiction accomplishes these things despite, and possibly because of, the fact that the world it describes is inherently false, and the characters it saves and destroys, kills and breathes life into, are *not* us. And as for us, Doll finds that fiction helps us know ourselves better, too, tapping “that which courses through the inner person,” helping us to “grasp more coherently the world within as well as without” (p. xii). Fiction, paradoxically, is the “lie that pedagogy needs in order to uncover the truths that make us human” (p. xii).

I imagine many of Doll's observations and arguments strike a chord with those who have devoted their lives to letters (and curriculum studies). Patrick Slattery and Kevin Daigle, for instance, find that "literature is one of the important sources for our curriculum theorizing, particularly . . . as literature might help us envision curriculum as a place of turmoil that is capable of nourishing our being in the midst of the frustration, violence, despair, and anguish of modern schooling" (1994, p. 438). Unfortunately, as many of us are all too aware, Doll is right that the humanities do seem to suffer dismissal in academia. For example, the alumni publications sent to me from my former school invariably find the work of those in the science and business departments far sexier than the work of those in the literary or visual arts, and I do confess to small twinges of inexplicable defensiveness when I tell new people what I do for a living. I even distinctly remember the worried faces of our dearest friends when my wife and I explained our plans for graduate school, in English and Art Education no less, immediately after getting married. And I see evidence every day of the increasing dismissal of Doll's "fiction" from education, entertainment, and all over the working world—people simply don't have to actually *read* as much as they did before, in the traditional sense at least, and so they don't, even in their free time (also disappearing).

Doll also recognizes "literalism as the problem of our culture" (xiii). The world is far too available, she says, and both the gore and the glory have been laid bare for anyone who wants to see them. But this is not so much a root problem as it is a symptom of our culture's great, unchecked proliferation of images and information, and to begin a discussion of our information age in "the old days" (*way* before computers) makes this relationship clear. Before the printing press and many other revolutionary scientific,



technological, social, and political changes, the world's great texts were held by few hands. Anyone who wanted to know about God had to go see the man who had His Word and could read it to him. Anyone who wanted to know the law had to ask the men who wrote it and the king who enforced it, and either of those might decide to change it on the spot. This world required an immense amount of trust and rigid social structure and created immense power in the hands of those who *knew*, and the history books are full of the abuses and manipulations that power allowed. But as the world became gradually more literate, individual, and equal—sometimes pushing the technology, and sometimes pushed by the technology—it could be experienced, formed, changed and changed again by a far greater number of people. We often called this “progress.”

But a funny thing happened on the way to personal autonomy: the information eventually outran people's ability to understand it and use it, and this is increasingly the case today. In our affair with availability (a positive at first) and our lust for more answers faster, we forgot some fundamental things about ourselves and our lives. We forgot that though the truth (little ‘t’, at least) about things is now much easier to get to on our own than it used to be, having 50 voices speak it does not make it more true, or clearer—in fact, the opposite is often true. An example of this problem is readily available to any surfer of the Internet; as I often half-jokingly warn my students, any one of them could be an expert on nuclear physics tomorrow. All it would take is a nice-looking Web site.

And, also quite obviously, we forgot that we are not all nuclear physicists. In fact, we are not really experts on very much—maybe one or two things, if we are hard workers or highly educated or both. Most of us still need somebody to fix our cars, the

world seems to contain more lawyers every day, and millions of people weekly still go ask somebody else to explain God to them. Not only are we back where we started in many ways, but we are in danger of moving into an age of post-literacy, where all information is available and no one knows anything. In summary, we forgot that we often still need, and want, people to tell us what *is* and what *isn't*. Before the literacy revolution, power rested with those who had the few texts; now our new masters are those who can *filter* through the many texts, making determinations about what matters most, to whom we should listen, what is the most helpful/harmful for us, and how these discoveries ought to be expressed and shared with the rest of us.

After the initial discouragement caused by such an observation, we can see that there is still hope for us in curriculum studies—especially in literature and the humanities—to become these *filters*, learn to recognize other *filters*, and help our students to learn *filtering* skills themselves, even if the way to make that hope real has been pushed to the very brink of complete dismissal as a subject for study. Some of that dismissal, though, is understandable, and humanities classrooms everywhere need to blow off the dust a little, and could use a little fresh air from open windows. Doll (2000) is certainly right that we still need to study fiction, that it retains an important role in our education even in our much-changed, 21<sup>st</sup>-century world; however, the humanities classes in which we study fiction, particularly our literature classes, would also do well to expand their study of the word to include the various, mostly digital forms it has taken in that 21<sup>st</sup> century world. It is true that sacred texts, constitutions, and political manifestos still rule the day, but they have been joined by (relative) newcomers like advertising, popular music, film, television, hypertext, and the nearly innumerable children of communication

technology. All are written, even if the writing is an unfamiliar kind; all are texts; all can be studied wherever texts are. What's more, everything that can be studied—inside the humanities and out—must be studied through language, even if the dialects vary; “24” and “twenty-four” are equally useless without an understanding of language and the signifier-signified relationship. In short, the *world* is still run by the *word*. And the word is ours. And if we teach our students anything at all, it should be the word's peaks and valleys, its powers and weaknesses, its beauties and its terrors, because to fail to teach the humanities is to fail to teach.

However, though putting more emphasis on the humanities in the curriculum, and particularly the literature classes in which Doll's (2000) “fictions” are so readily available, are perhaps the most important educational tasks we can undertake today, actually doing so in this particular time and place is, and will be, difficult. Our students today, for a variety of reasons, are just not in much mental shape right now for the kind of thinking the humanities and literature require. In “Journeying: A Meditation on Leaving Home and Coming Home” (1994/1999), David G. Smith seems to be worried that our young people today are under attack, living in a culture full of “lying, duplicity and misrepresentation” (p. 3) they are little equipped to resist or change. To this dire pronouncement I would add that our students today might not even be able to *recognize* they are under attack, let alone what kind of attack it is or how to resist it, and for this we, their educators, must share much of the blame. Even if we do not harm children ourselves in schools as much as Alan A. Block says we do in *I'm Only Bleeding* (1997), if our policies make them less equipped to defend themselves, we are complicit in their injuries.

As evidence of the current educational state of our students, I offer an illustration from my own classroom. Every year, just before we begin to discuss the special language, techniques, and general quirks of poetry, I like to lay all the cards on the table, so to speak, as is my style. I just come out and ask, in the manner common to my classroom, why everyone hates poetry, or finds it boring, or thinks it is “un-cool,” etc., and I use an old article from *Newsweek* announcing the death of poetry as a way to spark open discussion. Once we have registered our complaints, cleared up some misconceptions, and generally talked about what makes art “important,” if anything, each student writes an essay weighing in on the debate in a more organized manner, determining individually poetry’s vitality and diagnosing its various illnesses in a media-saturated, broadband America. Reading those sixty-odd essays is rough, and not just for my aesthetic interests; the vast majority of my students each year focus their critical vitriol not on poetry’s tendency toward language tricks, forced rhyme and rigid structures, or flowers-and-feelings sentimentality, but rather on the thinking it requires. They say poetry takes patience, time, and analytical effort to appreciate, and they just do not have those things in great supply. It makes them think, and they do not want to.

So why do students not want to think? And where are we in all of this? It is interesting that in D. G. Smith’s (1994/1999) fear for our students’ futures, he locates their only chance for salvation in luck, divinity, or genetics—not in curriculum or in teachers, even though he is one. This may be because Smith *is* a teacher, and knows that teaching today involves plenty of measuring, assessing, numbering, analyzing, and inculcating of students, but not much saving or protecting them, except from each other, of course. In fact, teachers may have become just one more of the many hands who

cannot wait to get at students, to write on their “blank slates” (Littleford, 1982/1999, p. 118), molding them and shaping them like so much clay, a guild of selfish Pygmalion’s producing a nation of Galatea’s, but maybe without the love. It is bad enough that children are a demographic brainwashed with brand loyalty of all kinds through media before they know what brands are, but public education’s “buying in” to the powerful forces like standardization, censorship, and consumer culture that hold sway in our schools today has all but sealed their fate, barring as D. G. Smith (1994/1999) implies some sort of divine intervention.

The effects of standardization and censorship in our schools, which seem superficially like efforts towards equality and strong moral fiber, can actually severely handicap our students, if we are not careful, even if it is not by design. The more we work to make assessments, methods, and materials the same (and safe), the more our students end up with an increasingly narrow worldview and set of skills. Sure, we can technically teach in whatever way we feel is appropriate for our students, but if the test is the same for everyone at the end, so will the teaching likely be. What we are currently offering our students in schools is, as Block (1988/1999) puts it, a curriculum and a world in which people may *read*, but not *write*. To Block, writing is “the construction of reality” (p. 178), what it takes “to be alive” (p. 177), but we have largely constructed that reality for young people already, having dramatically reduced their curriculum, career, behavior, and lifestyle options without their input and often without their knowing it. All that is left for them right now is reading, or “observing someone else’s reality,” and it is no wonder that we see so much of the “boredom, frustration, and alienation” (1988/1999, p. 178) in our students that Block says is the inevitable result—and no wonder that they

do not like poetry, which asks them to use writing muscles they have not flexed much in a long time.

However, all is certainly not lost, and teaching the humanities and literature are no less important to the curriculum because they are difficult. In fact, it is important that we remember that these recently neglected subjects carry within them already the tools for their revival, or resurrection, depending on how dire the particular case may be. These studies of the word do teach us to *read* the world, but they can also teach us to *write* it, to use Block's (1988/1999) language, and they offer each of us a place to ask the most important questions and explore the most influential ideas in our lives—and as such, they offer curriculum studies theorists a valuable foothold in the everyday life of public education. And though our students are not used to thinking much, or at least thinking hard about hard things, that does not mean that they *cannot* think, if given a chance. And such thinking is certainly good for them, and good for us, too. The world will be theirs one day—soon—and I, for one, want them to have carefully considered it. So, in short, we have come to a place where we who work in curriculum studies can find in public education studies of literature and the humanities in general a position to begin the work our vocation needs—the work of *revision*. I will begin, as we all should, with myself.

\* \* \*

I didn't want to call this section a "foreword" for a number of reasons. First of all, that's the part of the book I usually skip when I'm reading, since it is often full of words from one of the author's author friends about why the book is good or important; I already agree, since I bought it, and so I skip the foreword. I'm also not completely comfortable with its "prefatory comments" meaning, or "words before the main words,"

because I want to go ahead and get to what I have to say. I do, though, think I ought to explain what I'm about and why I think that way before I just jump right in, but "foreword" always sounded too extra, too added-on.

Secondly, while I do like the positive connotations (at least the auditory ones) of "forward," the word is just too linear, too promising of the modernist idea of "progress," as if simply putting one foot in front of the other is necessarily a good thing. What if we should slow down or stop sometimes, let alone double back, or skip, or dance? Doesn't the direction, or the goal, matter as well? Are there really any straight lines to anywhere anyway? "Forward" sounds nice at first, makes us think of getting out of ruts or overcoming obstacles, but it's just too simple to be very useful in such a complex world (or a dissertation about that complex world).

So, "for | word" it is. It's not in the dictionary, but if Beyonce can get "bootylicious" included, maybe there's hope. In any case, the term seems perfect for what I'm about here. I get the positive auditory connotations of "forward" and the prefatory connotations of "foreword," but with "for | word" it's also clear that I'm aiming at something different, and that my focus will be on, and in defense of, words and what they can do and mean. I am writing *for word*. To sum up a dissertation in a sentence, I think curriculum as it is practiced in high school education needs *revision*, I think literature class is the place to start that *revision*, and I think that literature class itself needs to be *revised* so that such work might take place there. And yes, the italics mean that I'm not just talking about mechanical tune-ups of essays. My argument—addressed to anyone like me who works with or is interested in secondary public education and wants to know what else it can do—is much bigger, and wants to include everything it

can: 21<sup>st</sup>-century America will still need literature class, but literature class will need a good strong dose of 21<sup>st</sup>-century America as well, and we will need *liminal scholars* of curriculum studies to keep this relationship a healthy one. This relationship will be complex, full of *feedback* loops and iterations that at first seem to belong more to a math or science class. However, this kind of work, these new ways of looking at the world inspired by mathematicians like Benoit Mandelbrot (1983), are also new ways of doing what reading and writing teachers have tried to teach all along: the need for *revision*. And I hope the “for | word” is a good indication of my intention to both argue for *revision* and also practice some of what I preach.

*Revision*, of course, is not a new term (appropriately, given what it means); it is both old and new, the kind of work interested in looking at old things in new ways and new things in old ways, a fact not lost scholars like James Hillman. Hillman’s (1975) *Re-Visioning Psychology* is both “old-fashioned and radically novel” (p. ix) because it looks backward to its roots and forward to its future in order to see what both have to do with current psychology; Hillman also points out that to see psychology clearly one must also look outside of it as well, and so his “vision leaves the field of psychology as it is usually thought of, and moves widely” (p. ix) to explore other ideas that touch his field or are touched by it. Though I don’t work much with the field of psychology, and will not here either, I am inspired by Hillman’s approach; I feel a kinship with him across both time and academic fields when he says that “what is needed is a revisioning, a fundamental shift of perspective out of that soulless predicament we call modern consciousness” (p. 3).



However, what I am doing here is not just Hillman's "revision" applied to curriculum studies of literature and the humanities; actually, I think the term *revision* belongs first to the study of letters, though it can be applied to other fields as well. In fact, one of the primary reasons I use the italics is that the term is such a common one in the humanities, particularly in literature, and its use is so natural in those conversations that I have to be careful to draw new attention to it, to say "no, not just re-writing, but also *re-writing*; not just revision, but *revision*"—something bigger, wider, broader, more fundamental, more elemental. I would also like to distinguish my use of the term *revision* from the one that carries mostly negative associations, like "revisionist history," or other such terms that mean something along the lines of "lies told to cover up the things we don't want you to see or think about, and that make us look bad." My idea of *revision* is in stark contrast to these negative uses: I want to start discussions, not stop them; I want to open things up, not close them down; I want to *dis-cover*, not *cover*; and I want to see things we haven't seen, not close our eyes to them. And though Hillman's work is closer to what I mean, in that it "moves widely through history, philosophy, and religion" (1975, p. ix) to see new connections, that's still not enough for me, for us, for education and curriculum studies as I am discussing it. I mean *revision* as an iterative, recurrent way of seeing, of thinking, of reading and writing in a dynamic world; I mean *revision* as a positive and possibility-full way of life. It only makes sense to me that the term belongs most, and fits most naturally, in the fields devoted to exploring ways to live.

For example, let's start, as I often like to, with a student complaint. My high school students, whenever we discuss myths or disappointments about education, seemingly always mention that their elementary teachers insisted that they would not

only need to learn to write in cursive, but that one day it would be the only way they wrote. By ninth grade or so, they can see that this is obviously untrue, and I have to agree that outside of signing my name to contracts and credit card slips, I don't really write anything in cursive. So, as they often are, my students are right.

But they are also wrong, though they should perhaps be forgiven for not understanding why. If by *cursive* we only mean that kind of parchment-scroll-y writing style for which I can never quite master the z, then I see their point; that's the only *cursive* most of them know. But we should recognize, as my *Webster's New Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* (1990) reports, that *cursive* also means "having a flowing, easy, impromptu character," and comes from the same Latin word *currere* that gives us some of education's most meaningful and important words and concepts, like *course*, *current*, and *curriculum*. So, taken in the fullest, most-associated sense possible, I disagree with my students whole-heartedly, and rather argue that we need far more attention to all things *cursive*.

In fact, I think we should go beyond that to include all things *re-cursive*, *re-current*, and *re-curricular*; we should always go back again in education and curriculum studies (*recurrere*), to see what still works as is, to see what has changed about our work or our world, to see what needs to be changed, to see what looks different today than it did yesterday—we should *re-vise*. We need to "run our courses" and then run them again; after all, one of my favorite things about the school schedule is that it begins and ends each year. In some ways the school year is like one of Benoit Mandelbrot's (1983) iterative equations, in which "there is both stability and change; the formula stays the same, the variables change (in an orderly but often nonpredictable manner)" (Doll, Jr.,

1993, p. 177). This means that I do not simply *repeat* each year's work; rather, it means that every year I get to *revise* my teaching, keeping things that still seem to work and changing things that need it and doing both as at least a slightly different person. The school schedule, then, is not made of loops but *feedback* loops, in which we take last year's output and use it as this year's input. Mandelbrot (1983) runs his mathematical feedback loops and gets things that look like islands and mountains; we run ours and hope we get something that looks like *America*. So, to teach, and especially to teach literature classes, we need both *vision* and *revision*.

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I am certainly not the only person who still thinks literature is valuable to the curriculum and curriculum studies, a fact which makes me happy. Dennis J. Sumara (2002) also argues in *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters* that by reading literature in class and “learning to attend to its details, readers can improve the quality of their lived experiences” (p. xiv). Sumara notices, too, the value of re-reading certain works, claiming that “each reading experience has been differently situated, conducted for different purposes, and has yielded different interpretations and effects” (p. 5). Furthermore, Sumara points out, quite rightly, that language “functions to connect and interpret the experiences that constitute one's experience of identity” (p. 85). He even goes so far as to say that literature “needs to be considered an integral feature of human experience” if we want it to matter, and says that we “need to reconsider what it means to include this work in schools” (p. 157).

I agree with the main points of both Doll (2000) and Sumara (2002), and find both of these works valuable to my understanding of what it means to teach literature, and

what literature can mean to curriculum studies. However, my interests and work also differ from Doll's and Sumara's in a couple of important ways. For one, though both see and successfully argue the value of literature, I think that we must also *revise* what we mean by "literature" and "reading" today; we must not only broaden our selections of traditional literary works for study, and study them in new ways as well, but we should also broaden the range of what *kinds* of works we should study, in curriculum studies and in literature class, to include other valuable texts like film, television, music, and the almost countless other word-based communications and expressions that are important parts of our lives and the lives of our students. In other words, the world is complex and dynamic, and so should our classes be; the more we do the same things in the same ways and hope for the same results, the less our classes will prepare our students to live in a world that doesn't work that way. To play with words in a way I wish we did more often, the more we "stay the course," the less *current* we will be.

Sumara can say that such non-traditional literary experiences "do not usually create the same depth of interpretive experience that can occur with repeated readings and interpretations of novels" (2002, p. 99), but I disagree from both a personal and professional perspective. I have been moved by and learned from revisiting countless listening, viewing, and reading experiences of the non-traditional type—and the same seems to be true of my students. The novel, I contend, is not the ultimate form of "literature," but rather just one form among many today, and no more valuable than the others. And studied together, in the same course, these texts can sometimes provide experiences unavailable through isolated study; I have always found *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1921/1996) interesting, but I didn't love it until I saw *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

The Allman Brothers, too, were just a band my roommate listened to until I took a hybrid History/Southern Literature course that asked me if it was okay for a mixed-race Southern band to sing the blues, especially a song called “Whipping Post” (1969) in which the guitarists attempt to replicate the victim’s screams.

Part of my interest in *revision* of curriculum, particularly in secondary public education and especially in literature class, is that I also think that more voices ought to be part of the discussion, no matter the title on their name tags—and listening to, analyzing, and conversing with voices is what literature classes are supposed to do, right? The kind of “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2004, p. xiii) I want to have in my classes would be, well, more *complicated* than I have often found in my official academic studies, especially before graduate school. For example, in reading works like Sumara’s (2002), I often find myself wondering what a guy who hates to read might have to say about his argument—*especially* since that guy is never going to read Sumara’s book. Shouldn’t he get to speak as well? For this reason, I must confess that I actually found Henry Miller’s (1962) essay “To Read or Not to Read” much more interesting for my own work. A man who made his living and reputation as a writer but is willing to ask whether or not we should read—and do so with honest vulnerability, as if the question is not already answered in advance? That sounds like a place to start a “complicated conversation.” I want to let him ask me and my students, “of what use books if they lead us not back to life, if they fail to make us drink more avidly of life?” (p. 159); it would be hard to argue that he does not deserve the chance. And then I want to talk about that Pink Floyd song that says “we don’t need no education” (1979) and maybe also Donald

Sutherland's disillusioned English professor character in *Animal House* (1978), the one who insists "I'm not joking—this is my job!"

In fact, I have found that I am at my best, and my students are most engaged, when my "lesson planning" goes like this, when it is open, dynamic, and continually *revised*. Let's say my state-prescribed list of authors includes John Donne. I am not a world-renowned expert in John Donne's work, and I do not want to be, because that would mean ignoring too many other interesting things and people for too long. So, I take out my trusty *A Glossary of Literary Terms* by M. H. Abrams (1999), in which I discover that John Donne is called a "metaphysical poet," meaning that he "employed a subtle and often deliberately outrageous logic" (p. 158) and also made "ingenious use of paradox, pun, and startling parallels in simile and metaphor" (p. 159). One of the other textbooks I've collected over the years (*The Riverside Anthology of Literature, third edition*) includes a passage from T.S. Eliot, who says in his admiration of Donne that "when a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience" (1997, p. 591). In other words, Donne tied together things that were not obviously connected, and explored that relationship—which is great news to me, because his "The Sun Rising" (2002), in which he cleverly tries to talk the sun out of disturbing him and his lover, makes me think of George Harrison's "Here Comes the Sun" (1969) more than anything else. In fact, the more I look, the more I see two guys talking to lovers indirectly by talking about the sun, just with a different interest. One is a Renaissance poet, and the other is a Beatle, but that only makes the connection more interesting.

And then, when a good friend accidentally leaves behind a Jack Johnson album containing the song “Banana Pancakes” (2005), I notice in Johnson’s attempt to get his lover to “close the curtains” and “pretend like there’s no world outside” the same thing Donne tried to do. Does Jack Johnson read John Donne? Did George Harrison? Or, could it be that love hasn’t changed much (at least in terms of trying to make romantic moments last) in 400 years? Now I have a “lesson plan,” and we’re even studying John Donne the way he studied everything else. I guess I could limit our discussion to traditional literature, make our “conversation” less “complicated,” but why?

I do not tell these kinds of stories in this work because I think I am a model teacher, but rather as an example of how much is out there if we’ll open the doors a little in public education and curriculum studies in general, and to allay some fears about what will happen if we do. Another teacher’s friend might not leave behind a Jack Johnson album, and she may not have spent her junior year of college obsessed with *Abbey Road* (1969) like I did; and for that matter, there is nothing magically effective about “The Sun Rising.” We are all different teachers with different students, and the interactions of our lives and knowledge and interests are different, and differently “complicated” and dynamic, in every room. There are thousands of different ways to teach a text, and thousands of texts to teach and conversations to have. I don’t know how to have the conversation in your classroom, so don’t worry about trying to have the one in mine.

And anyway, another John Donne poem, “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (2002), is an even better example of the poet’s “metaphysical” style and also the kind of work I want to do here. When I read this poem in high school, like every other high-schooler in America probably did, I felt nothing. I didn’t like it, and it didn’t speak to

me. But today, this poem makes my head spin. Not only do I know what it's like to have a love from which I could not bear to be separated, but Donne chooses, of all things, a *compass* as his primary metaphor for his relationship with his beloved. He says to her, the "fixed foot" in the metaphorical relationship, that "Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end, where I begun." I had no idea, until I *revised* this poem years later, that geometry could be so romantic, or beautiful (I certainly don't remember it that way). But why can't geometry be beautiful? And why can't a poet use whatever seems best for the expression of his ideas, even if it is a sharp metal math tool? After all, Percy Shelley (1840/1977) did say in his "A Defence of Poetry" that the language of the poet "marks the before unapprehended relations of things" (p. 482).

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Besides, others have pointed out that the sciences and the arts need each other, and would be better served working together than apart. To oversimplify his point, Thomas S. Kuhn (1996) says in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that paradigms hold in part because we get used to seeing the world a certain way. Eventually, though, through extensive application of the current paradigm, scientists become aware of an anomaly, or recognize that "nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science" (p. 52-3). Scientists then explore and attempt to verify the anomaly, until eventually "the paradigm theory has been adjusted so that the anomalous has become the expected" (p. 53). To do this, a scientist must learn "to see nature in a different way" (p. 53). However, breaking with "normal science" is no small matter; Kuhn notes that once it has become a paradigm, "a scientific theory is declared invalid only if an alternate candidate is available to take its place" (p. 77), making the job



of a scientific revolutionary who explores anomalies all the more difficult. For this reason, “creative scientists” must occasionally be like risk-taking, creative artists, “able to live in a world out of joint” (p. 79), working without a paradigm net. They have to be capable of *revision*.

Lucky for us, our brains actually have the ability to work pretty well “out of joint” when they have to, as Paul M. Churchland (1996) explains in *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul*. When the world around us looks strange, or acts in a way that we do not expect, our brains apparently take these “partial or degraded inputs” and fill in the gaps through a process he calls “vector completion” (p. 114) and illustrates with a series of seemingly heterogeneously-marked images that suddenly look like familiar pictures once the information is tweaked just slightly in just the right way (p. 110-12). The brain accomplishes this impressive and underappreciated feat by using recurrent pathways, or cycling through “antecedently learned prototypes” (p. 115) until it happens upon something that helps the oddly-shaped blotches instead become a man on a horse, for example. Far more than a visual trick, Churchland outlines how the brain’s “neural network with recurrent pathways” (p. 115) has aided scientists in some of their most important discoveries, from the wave-behavior of light in the Two-Slit experiment (pp. 280-3) to the *revised* understanding of our solar system by some of science’s greatest minds (pp. 115-21).

Perhaps the greatest news from Churchland (1996) is that while much of science is out of reach for anyone without highly specialized training, the vector completion that is so vital to scientific advances is within reach to all of us; as he says, “any normal human can do this” (p. 279). In fact, it is not necessarily the most expertly trained

scientific researcher who is best at vector completion; it is the one with the best imagination. In his words, the “unusually creative people among us are simply those who are unusually skilled at such recurrent manipulation” (p. 279). According to Churchland, those responsible for breakthroughs in science (or any other field, most likely) are broadly educated, discerning, self-motivated, and ready for the “novel deployment and extension of existing activational prototypes” (p. 279). In other words, they may have to work like “metaphysical” poets, and they certainly need to be able to do the work of *revision*, to look again, to see things new.

Mandelbrot provided another link between the arts and sciences in *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (1983) by proving that geometry and natural beauty are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the only thing really shocking about Donne’s use of a compass to talk about love these days is that the poem is so old (did Mandelbrot read Donne too?). Once Mandelbrot showed us the mathematical, “fractal” properties behind coastline lengths (p. 25), ink clouds (p. 54), river paths (p. 68), galaxy distributions (p. 85), cloud shapes (p. 98), and even earthquake fault lines (p. 461), people started to see the beauty and mystery of fractals everywhere. In fact, a number of people have even explored the ways our newly-recognized complex, dynamic, *feedback*-laden world might change the way we think of curriculum, and some use literary terminology to do so, even if they do not actually apply such ideas to literature as I want to. *Engaging Minds: Learning and Teaching in a Complex World* (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000) is one text devoted to such matters, and examines how “new ways of talking about learning and teaching have arisen, ones that locate formal education in a complex ecology of unfolding events” (p. xi). Davis and Sumara also point out in *Complexity and Education: Inquiries into*

*Learning, Teaching, and Research* (2006) that we should move away from “all-encompassing explanations” and toward “complexity thinking,” which requires a “poetic sensibility” and relies on “analogy, metaphor, and other associative . . . functions of language” (p. 7). They also note that “the field of education . . . sits at the intersections of many other areas of inquiry” (p. 130), and so “complexity thinking” might be the best way to explore their dynamic relationships. *Chaos, Complexity, Curriculum, and Culture: A Conversation* (Doll, Jr., Fleener, Trueit, & St. Julien, 2005) even seems to want to sit at those “intersections” Davis and Sumara talk about, at least for mathematics educators, hoping to serve as a site for scholars to participate in “iterative patterns of ongoing conversation” (Fleener, p. 15) about complexity and education.

So, much of the work of curriculum and education today is dynamic and complex, eschews easy answers, needs lots of recursive conversation, relies on metaphor and association, and requires a “poetic sensibility” (Davis and Sumara, 2006, p. 7)? It seems, then, that we have returned to literature and the arts *revised* as a necessary companion for even the most specialized scientific or mathematical study, not to mention everything else. When Churchland (1996) looks at art and sees the “creative deployment and redeployment” (p. 297)—*vision* and *revision*—of prototypes, he is only telling us what we already know. We have seen the night sky through van Gogh’s eyes and heard the sounds of spring through Vivaldi’s ears, and so we know that perhaps no one is as good at *revision*, at taking our messy world from us and giving it back a little bit different, a little more beautiful, a little *more* than we gave it to him, as the artist. Vector completion is his job; anomaly is his calling.

According to both Kuhn (1996) and Churchland (1996), and inferred from the work of many others, it is the creative people, the ones with the most active, “poetic” imaginations attached to their extensive training, that push science and other fields in new directions, that direct the shift of paradigms, that can help us figure out how to live and learn in a complex world. And that brings us back to *The Need for Revision*, and the purpose and nature of this dissertation. While Davis and Sumara (2006) point out that education can serve as an intersection for various fields, I say that is true of literature class more than any other place in secondary public education, and think that maybe studying poetry is the best way to develop a “poetic sensibility” (p. 7). After all, when Davis and Sumara say “complexity thinking” is “an umbrella notion that draws on and elaborates the irrepressible human tendency to notice similarities among seemingly disparate phenomena” (p. 7), or when William E. Doll, Jr. (1993) asks for “rigor” in curriculum that “means purposely looking for alternatives, relations, connections” (p. 182), it is hard not to hear echoes of Donne’s metaphysical poetry and Shelley’s “Defence” (1840/1977). In short, I agree a little more every day with poet Adrienne Rich (2001, p. 118):

The longer I live, the more history I live through, the more poetries I read and hear aloud, the more I recognize the sheer difficulty and multiplicity of our art, the absolute necessity for it in this time, and the ethical and artistic responsibilities it demands.

Also, it seems to follow that if we need a “poetic sensibility” (Davis and Sumara, 2006) in order to find connections and relationships in a complex world, then our studies should also be as broad and inclusive as possible to allow sufficient room for those ties to

form. Here again, the case can be made for a renewed curricular interest in literature and the humanities. Literature is, first and foremost, the study of *everything*, since no aspect of the world or its various messy inhabitants is out of play for its subject—and that is the way I teach it. Perhaps the only field bigger than literature is curriculum studies, and it is no surprise the two have much in common, or that I want to work in both. Having found, and loved, curriculum studies, where it seems that everything is truly on the table (even math and science), the biggest questions are asked, the smallest details matter in the biggest contexts, and the real work is begun in understanding the world I live in and trying to share that understanding with the young people learning to participate in that world, I want to bring it into my classroom. Lucky for me, I already teach the subject best suited to serve as an entry point for new discussions about why, and whom, and what, and how we teach and learn. Who speaks, and/or who is spoken to? What is said/not said, and how? These are the kinds of questions that drive curriculum studies—and also literature classes. They are *cursive* questions. And since both curriculum studies and literature can help us continually see the world with new eyes, I teach the perfect subject for *revision*.

In addition (math again!) to literature class's freedom and power to study how anything is put into words, every time I read, write, listen to, watch, or talk about something, it is a little different and so am I—and this is true when I teach these things as well; many of the activities in an average literature class can already be treated like Mandelbrot's (1983) iterative equations, if we will just let them. To teach in good faith, then, we need to *revise* our work every time we do it, and we need to be open to whatever enters into our "complicated conversation" tomorrow. I think we can begin by

recognizing that the best part of our classes is the fact that we have a lot of different people with different lives all in one room at the same time, and listen to all those voices. I also think that we should approach our curricular work the same way, by listening to as many disparate voices as possible, contributing our own, and seeing what the *feedback* loops produce. Donne (2002) saw math in poetry, and Davis and Sumara (2006) see a “poetic sensibility” in math; if public education is the place where these things meet, why not let them talk to each other? Tom Stoppard (1993) brings complex math, landscape architecture, wildlife populations, laws of thermodynamics, literary criticism, romantic trysts, and Lord Byron under the same roof in *Arcadia*; I propose that we do the same kind of thing in our literature classrooms. I propose that we make them our great meeting places, the hubs of our secondary public academic world, where people of many walks of life and future fields of study can come together and talk and read and write their way into the world’s complexity. Let’s invite all of our academic fields, and politics, and pop culture, and anything else that seems relevant, and have that “complicated conversation.” Mine will meet everyday in room 110.

And it will also happen in this dissertation. I want to speak in a language at the crossroads of academia, poetry, and casual conversation, as befits my subject. Doll, Jr. (1993) says that our work should be “multifaceted, mixing the technological with the human, the proven with the innovative, and the serious with the playful” (p. 8), and I intend to take him up on that here. I want to advocate the need for *revision* in this work and also do it at the same time; I want to focus on literature but also bring in scientists and poets and philosophers and personal stories and songs and films and anything else I can think of, and let them all talk to each other. And, as befitting complex work in a

complex world, this dissertation will be full of *feedback* and iterations, revisited quotations and references and ideas in new contexts, and will hopefully start a discussion rather than end it. I may not get to the irregular, iterative, dynamic beauty of Mandelbrot's (1983) fractals, but that is what I'm aiming for anyway, in structure, method, and content. I will try to be *cursive, current, and curricular*, and then also *recursive, recurrent, and re-curricular*. If all goes well, I'll end where I began—though changed—and then start again with *revision*.

### **Each Morning is a Gift: Poetry and the Need for *Revision* in Public Education**

Chapter 1 will be the idea of *revision*'s poetic opening statement, and as such will look specifically at poetry's relationship with *revision* and public education, both in general and in my own life. It will be written partially in poetry and partially in explication and discussion of that poetry, and will argue the benefits of having our students do both. The poetry will be my own, and the discussion around and about it will draw on the ideas of what it means to read and write by literary theorists like Roland Barthes (1977) and Harold Bloom (1975/2003). This chapter will also look at what William F. Pinar's (1975/1994) ideas on "currere" have to do with writing, as well as Block's (1988/1999) notions of "reading" and "writing" in school. It will also rely on James B. Macdonald's (1964/1995) idea that school should "stimulate the child's creative encounter with reality" (p. 33), and Jacob Bronowski's (1978) argument that "every work of art is an experiment in living" (p. 143). Central, as well, will be comments on the "interpreted" nature of the world from D. G. Smith (1988/1999) and J. H. Miller (2001a). Since I will be working as both poet and critic, this section will try to do what poetry tries

to do—see big pictures through small details, in words that leave plenty of room for the reader to move around in and find his own way.

It will begin by explaining, very briefly, how I got here. I was always good at math and science, growing up; they came pretty easy to me, and I appreciated the attention to details, the neatness and order, the confidence with which they seemed to be able to explain the world to me. But, as I got older, and consequently the world got messier, math and science just did not seem *big* enough, anymore, to hold it all in; and despite their *smallness*, they seemed to ignore a lot of details that matter. I wanted to connect details, I could see what had to be sacrificed for neatness and order, and I was no longer convinced by that confidence. I eventually ended up studying the *biggest* subject I could find: literature. I think it was a return to an old love of mine, poetry, that finally did it; I could see now, looking back at old favorites (*re-vising*), how poetry wanted to make small things big, to show us through each new tiny detail a world that is always bigger than we thought. Poetry suddenly seemed like the appropriate language for the world around me, the language of possibility and of *revision*; suddenly, “everyday language” did indeed seem to me like “a forgotten and therefore used up poem,” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 205) and I found that “poetry is really what lets us dwell” (p. 213) here, *live* here, each day.

### **Singing the Song of the Open Road: Walt Whitman and Curriculum**

Chapter 2 will argue that one of the ways literature and humanities classes can help us live and learn better in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is through constantly offering us a change in perspective, a way to *revise* our world, and it will use the work of Walt Whitman as an example; I will also rely on theorists like Pinar (1975/1994), Block (1997), Henry A.



Giroux (2003), Macdonald (1971/1995), David W. Jardine (2003), and others who advocate more openness in education. When I look at the strategies, emphases, and requirements laid out in discussions of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, I do not see, as many educators seem to these days, the root of many of our current problems in the classroom. What I see in all this focus on "accountability" is simply the next in a series of logical steps, a mere symptom of an illness that pervades all arenas of culture in the United States: a way of looking at the world that I call *smallness*. Disney and others have it right; it is a "small world," and it does seem to be getting smaller all the time, at least in the way we currently think of it.

The great thing about a flawed perspective is that it can be changed. And literature, with its innumerable stories from innumerable perspectives about innumerable lives, as well as its reminder that there are still new stories to be told, is the perfect place to begin that change. Some authors, like nineteenth-century poet Walt Whitman, even speak directly to this issue, and his work is a perfect example of the way literature can serve as a site for such discussions. For example, his "Song of the Open Road" (1892/1993) begins with lines that could be taken as a motto for the openness and freedom I am advocating for teachers and students: "Healthy, free, the world before me, / The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose" (lines 2-3). "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" (1892/1993) is about a speaker who leaves an astronomy lecture early to look at the night sky himself, and it reminds us that despite our considerable scientific knowledge and rigid educational methods and structures, we still need "an unbounded place" in which we "can 'wander', can take personal measurements, and can 'from time to time' look up 'in perfect silence at the stars'" (Gold, 2004, p. 225).

“There Was a Child Went Forth” (1892/1993) is a long list of all the things that a child encounters and is affected by when he “goes forth,” and ends up being the kind of argument that Macdonald makes, that “the school is not the center of the child’s learning, but merely one of his environmental situations” (1971/1995, p. 52) in which learning takes place. And perhaps Whitman’s most famous and important work, “Song of Myself” (1892/1993) is a sprawling, exploratory manifesto on life-long learning, in which Whitman ponders, wonders, appreciates, remembers, imagines, considers all the things that make him who he is at that moment—or to use Pinar’s (1975/1994) terms, he “regresses,” “progresses,” “analyzes,” and “synthesizes” (p. 19). Studying works like this can remind our students that it is, in fact, still a very big world, with plenty of room left for them to sing their own songs.

**“I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”: Pinar, Percy, and the Possibility of  
a *Search***

Chapter 3 will be about how literature class can help students continually *revise* themselves and their particular identity and place in the world. Recognizing through literature and humanities study that the world is a large, complex place full of possibilities for learning and living, students can better, and more freely, figure out what kind of people they want to be. One way do so is to *write* themselves, practicing the use of their own voices; much like Whitman did, and Block (1988/1999) recommends, we can all work out our world and ourselves through language. D. L. Roseboro (2008) also finds much to recommend greater attention to writing in his work on Lacan, pointing out that “to know one’s self is to recognize one’s mobility in language” (p. 8), and so this chapter will refer to his work also.

However, this chapter will primarily explore the connection between Pinar's (2007) *Intellectual Advancement Through Disciplinarity* and Walker Percy's (1961/1998) novel *The Moviegoer*. Interestingly, both texts advocate exploring the world around us by means of both "verticality," or attention to history, and "horizontality," or attention to the contemporary world around us. In Percy's novel, the "search" is for who we are and what we are doing here; in Pinar's work, he argues for the same kind of thing in the field of curriculum studies. Though they do not use the same terms for it, both texts see the enemy as what Percy calls "everydayness," or the simple, mindless, muddling-through of our days that leads to despair with our lives and our work.

In this chapter I will take the advice of Percy's character Binx Bolling, and go on a "search," using the terminology and methods he describes in *The Moviegoer*, as an example of how literature can be used to combat the "everydayness" of some of our most valued identity markers, like our careers, our citizenship/patriotism, and our spirituality—all three of which seem to be tied tightly together in contemporary America. Percy's idea of the "search" can be seen as one kind of *revision*, since it requires us to step out of the routine of our daily lives long enough to see where and who and what we are, and to decide what to do with ourselves next, having seen those things fresh. On this search I will explore Naomi Klein's (2007) *The Shock Doctrine*, Michelle Goldberg's (2007) *Kingdom Coming*, Michel Foucault's (2004/2007) *Security, Territory, Population*, Susan Faludi's (2007) *The Terror Dream*, and Kevin Phillips's (2006) *American Theocracy*, as well as my own personal experiences as a teacher, American, and Christian.

### Asking Big Questions in Small Spaces: Ethics, Literature, and the Classroom

As students explore, play with, accept, reject, or otherwise deal with the world around them (and before them) in humanities and literature study, they will often encounter complex, difficult issues concerning the various ways individuals and groups of people interact with each other. Relying on work from scholars like Jo Anne Pagano (1981/1999), bell hooks (1994), Patrick Slattery and Kevin Daigle (1994), and Giroux (2006), chapter 4 will argue that literature class is a valuable site for *revision* of our relationships with the people around us, both near and far. It will begin with a discussion of a poem by Linda Pastan (1981) called “Ethics,” in which students in a school are asked each year to decide whether or not they would save an old woman or a priceless painting in the event of a museum fire. This section will also rely on Aristotle’s (1925/1998) *Nicomachean Ethics* and Nietzsche’s (1967) *On the Genealogy of Morals*. For examples of how literary works allow us to explore the ways we think of and treat others, I will look at Mary Shelley’s (1831/1994) *Frankenstein*, Joseph Conrad’s (1921/1996) *Heart of Darkness*, and Albert Camus’s (1942/1988) *The Stranger*.

Mary Shelley’s work allows us to think about the increasingly complex relationship between science and the body, and does so in a way that is accessible to high school students. It will be discussed along with Eugene Thacker’s (2003) “Data Made Flesh,” Catherine Waldby and Thomas Mitchell’s (2006) *Tissue Economies*, and Kaushik Sunder Rajan’s (2006) *Biocapital*. *Frankenstein* gives students a chance to discuss some of the most interesting and controversial issues that are already affecting our daily lives in ways seldom considered, and gives them a chance to explore positions on those issues

before they become the adults who will be asked to make very difficult public and personal decisions in the future about what it means to be human.

Joseph Conrad's (1921/1996) work is a rare chance in high school to explore and critique colonialism, and it offers at least some distance from the political censorship such a study might suffer from by being set in London and about people who are "not us." Speaking of censorship, Chinua Achebe's (1977) response to this work certainly raises interesting issues, as does J. H. Miller's (2001a) defense of Conrad's work against charges of racism. Because *Heart of Darkness* also asks us "capitalism at what price?", Adam Smith's (1904/2003) *The Wealth of Nations* and Max Weber's (1958/2003) *The Protestant Work Ethic* will also be discussed.

Albert Camus's troubling work *The Stranger* (1942/1988) will be discussed for its "destabilizing" qualities (Young, p. 12), since its first-person narrator acts, just once, in a way shockingly out of step with his community's, and students' own personal, values. He is condemned as a monster for a few minutes he cannot get back, and frustratingly won't ask for, and readers are asked, among many other difficult questions, whether or not they can turn on a voice they have learned to trust. This work's uneasiness and ability to make us squirm will be explored along with Art Spiegelman's (1986) *Maus* and Peter Singer's (2002) *One World*.

### **The Story is the South: Literature and the Exploration of Place**

Not only can literature and humanities classes help our students better understand their relationships with each other, but they can also help young people explore and *revise* their relationships with their own respective places, their historical, cultural, artistic, political contexts as they are situated in geography. Most importantly, young

people can learn to better engage the stories told about the places in which we live, and about how we should live in them. Chapter 5 will explore the “mythical” nature of the United States, and the South particularly, arguing that our ideas of these entities are largely a matter of storytelling, and are therefore perfect subjects for literature classes.

Few people agree on much of anything when trying to characterize the South (even which states should be included is controversial), and part of the problem in trying to understand what the South was, is, and will be is perhaps due to the much-lauded Southern Renaissance in literature that began in the 1930s. This great intellectual flourishing was a *creative, imaginative, artistic* flourishing; it was not a *scholarly* one, and certainly not a *critical* one, at least in the traditional academic sense. One can hardly overestimate the importance of this difference; really long story short, most of what we call “Southern history” is really a lot of novels, some old legends, and a good dose of *Gone With the Wind* (1939).

The primary texts for this discussion of the blurry line between history and literature in the South will be David Goldfield’s (2002) *Still Fighting the Civil War*, C. Vann Woodward’s (1993) *The Burden of Southern History*, James C. Cobb’s (2005) *Away Down South*, Peter Applebome’s (1996) *Dixie Rising*, W. J. Cash’s (1941) *The Mind of the South*, and Joel Williamson’s (1984) *The Crucible of Race*. This discussion will also include ideas about place and identity in curriculum from Joe Kincheloe, Pinar, and Patrick Slattery (1994), Pinar (2004), David A. Gruenewald (2003), Reta Ugena Whitlock (2007), Brian Casemore (2008), and Madeleine R. Grumet (1980/1999). In addition, this chapter will also draw on numerous works of Southern literature and argue

that a place whose regional identity is so intertwined with stories is also a place that can be, and should be, *revised*.

### **The Useless Studying the Useless: Aesthetics in Contemporary American Education**

To give art and literature such a prominent place in education, though, certainly opens up the possibilities for misunderstanding or misuse. In fact, *use* is part of the difficulty, and Chapter 6 will argue that our relationship with and conception of aesthetics in curriculum needs to be *revised* as well; we treat everything in education today as a tool, and if there is no clear “job” for that tool, it is often discarded. When Oscar Wilde says in his introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891/1998) that “all art is quite useless,” it is a joke is on us, or at least all of us who would quickly join in with “Amen! What a waste of time.” Wilde, though, was an aesthete, and as such believed that art is not a *tool* for anything necessarily, or a *means* to accomplish some goal; rather, it *is* the goal. This perspective gives art, and all things beautiful in this same way, very little of what we might call “exchange value” today; unfortunately, we often say one cannot really *do* anything with art, or knowledge about the arts, and certainly not with a degree in the arts, and so we have no *use* for it, especially in our schools, or for Wilde’s argument that it does not need to be *used*.

And it is not just true that arts education is increasingly going under-funded, under-supported, and under-appreciated, but we are also practicing an education that is less *aesthetic* in every sense of the word in every field. The results of such an attitude and approach, however, are not surprisingly often ugly, and may keep us from ever really experiencing many of the very things we say are the most important things (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness come to mind). It would be hard to assess happiness or

beauty on a spreadsheet, after all. When we cut art and aesthetics out of our schools, or any other kind of everyday experience, we often end up living lives that are not very beautiful, either.

In addition to Wilde, and the works of other literary figures like John Keats (1820/1990), Percy Shelley (1819/1977), Seamus Heaney (1966/1998), Jack Kerouac (1955), and James Joyce (1916/1994), the primary texts for this argument will be Friedrich Schiller's (1795/1954) *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Peggy Kamuf's (2005) *Book of Addresses*, Jonathan Kozol's (2005) *The Shame of the Nation*, Pinar's (1972/1994) "Working From Within," Heidegger's (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, and Block's (1997) *I'm Only Bleeding*. Each of these texts argues in its own way for the importance in curriculum of the kinds of things that cannot be "accounted" for easily—the very kinds of things taught in literature and other arts classes.

### ***Living Beyond: St. Paul, Romanticism, and the Doors of Artistic Perception***

Chapter 7 will argue that we are all of us, everywhere, always *living beyond*, or trying to. We are forever looking for something more, or at least something else, striving always to see, or feel, or live *beyond* ourselves, our lives, our *now*, even if we disagree about how to go about it. Whether we dream, write, watch, smoke, swallow, paint, or pray to the thing that we hope will take us there, our goal is the same: profound improvement of the human condition—or at least *our* human condition, even if it is just for a little while. We have always sought it, and always will; we are, at heart, Romantics, "longing to transcend" (Huxley, 1954/2004, p. 62). In fact, we develop new ways to *live beyond* all the time, taking the words of those nineteenth-century British poets and writing them anew on our communities, our bodies, and our souls. This interest is old,



too; perhaps the first Romantic—in this sense at least—was St. Paul, who *lived beyond* so successfully that he needed a new name (Acts 13). And since we are still in many ways Romantics, it is time to *revise* the works of that literary movement, and perhaps bestow on them the very “prophet” status they sought.

Partly inspired by works from scholars like Noel Gough (2002), M. E. M. Moore (2002), and Michael S. Littleford (1982/1999), this chapter will be divided into four sections, examining the ways we attempt to *live beyond* our societies, our words, our bodies, and our experiences, respectively. For the first section, I will discuss the utopian interests of the Romantic poets, especially Coleridge, and also Frederic Jameson’s (2007) *Archaeology of the Future*. For the second section I will look at William Wordsworth’s and Percy Shelley’s literary attempts at immortality and also W. J. T. Mitchell’s (2005) *What Do Pictures Want?* and Henry Jenkins’s (2006) *Convergence Culture*. For the third section, I will focus on Keats’s ever-imminent mortality and Lesley Sharp’s (2007) *Bodies, Commodities, & Biotechnologies*, Bill Hayes’s (2005) *Five Quarts*, Marcia Angell’s (2005) *The Truth About Drug Companies*, and Don Ihde’s (2005) *Bodies in Technology*. Finally, I will look at the Romantic interest in transcendent experience, other consciousness, and visionary states, focusing on Blake, Aldous Huxley’s (1954/2004) *Doors of Perception*, and a few Victorian novels that explore Romantic themes. The basic argument of this chapter will be that sometimes old texts can come alive in new ways, and should not be discarded for their age.

### **Time for Some *Feedback*: A Curricular Defense of the Pop Song**

Chapter 8 will argue that while some old texts need to be *revised* for their relevance today, we also need to *revise* our ideas of what can be studied in literature class

to include some new, valuable texts that can help bridge the gap between us and our students. More emphasis on arts and humanities can certainly open up the ideas of what a good education is, what a good life can be, and what successful participation in school means; however, they could also stand to be opened up a little themselves. It is still true that “liberal education is education in culture or toward culture” (Strauss, 1968/1995, p. 3); however, it is no longer true that that culture can be studied through only the “great books” (p. 3). In other words, we narrow and flatten education when we only pay attention to math and science, and when we only care about quantifiable results, but to simply go back to the “classics” of humanities and literature study is not enough. Where are film, and television, and advertising to be studied, if not in the humanities? At their best, can we really say they carry less artistic merit than our classics in literature, or that writing and rhetoric skills are not employed by them? At their worst, don’t our students need to be able to recognize the flaws? If we really want to help our students understand and explore the world they live in, then we must admit that the world contains far more texts to be studied than the dusty ones we have always used; this chapter will look at popular music as an example of one of those rich texts.

Besides, somewhere along the way we forgot, or ignored, that something like popular music shares its origins with our beloved classical literature anyway. People like Georgiades and Nietzsche remind us that what we think of separately as “music” and “literature” actually come from the same roots; “both prose language and poetry derive from the exactly, comprehensively musical complex of ‘*musike*’” in ancient Greece (Babich, 2006, p. 45). And even if we mostly keep popular music out of schools, that does not keep it out of our lives. As Lawrence Grossberg says in “Rock,

Territorialization, and Power” (1991/1997), our “musical environments strongly influence the rhythms, tempos, and intensities of our lives” (p. 96) whether our school doors are largely shut against those environments or not.

This chapter will be a defense of popular music as a text for study in literature classes, and will also explore it as an important illustration of Mandelbrot’s (1983) dynamic, iterative systems; popular music even has a much-used term for these kinds of loops: *feedback*. Some of the music texts discussed here will be works by Ryan Adams, Wilco, Leonard Cohen, James Brown, and M Ward. This chapter will also discuss the work of theorists like David Riesman (1950/1990), Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel (1964/1990), Greil Marcus (2008), Theodor W. Adorno (1965/2002, 1938/2002, 1941/2002), and a study of music and the brain by Oliver Sacks (2007). For my discussion of fractals and complexity, I will use John Briggs’s (1992) *Fractals: The Patterns of Chaos*, Yuriy Baryshev and Pekka Teerikorpi’s (2002) *Discovery of Cosmic Fractals*, and William J. Jackson’s (2004) *Heaven’s Fractal Net*.

### **III Communication**

Chapter 9 will argue that once we open the curricular doors of our literature and humanities classrooms to texts like popular music, it will be hard to avoid dealing with the digital behemoth lurking outside of those classrooms that is the ever-increasing proliferation of communication technologies. This chapter will look at some of the most worrisome (for today’s school officials, at least) technologies, from BlackBerries to Facebook, and explore the ways in which those forms of communication and expression are both positive and negative forces in our lives and the lives of our students. I will argue that the work of *revision* is needed if we are to remain relevant as teachers of

“communication skills” (that’s what my school-board-issue name tag says); however, I will also argue that *revising* these new word-based technologies can also help us see their benefits and flaws, and help our students do the same.

For this chapter, I will draw from my own rocky but rewarding personal experience as a graduate literature student working with new digital technologies in a literature classroom, which culminated in *William Blake’s “The Everlasting Gospel”: A Hypertext Edition* (2001); I saw, firsthand, the analog and digital worlds collide, and lived (and graduated) to tell about it. I will also use Heidegger’s (1977) “The Question Concerning Technology” as a way to examine our current relationship with our various digital devices today, both inside and outside the school. I will also explore texts by Lev Manovich (2001) and Samuel Weber (1996) for this part of the discussion.

Using work by J. H. Miller (1999), Julie A. Webber (2003), and various curriculum scholars as a foundation, I will argue that our students today need much greater “media literacy” than we are currently teaching them. They will need to be, at least metaphorically, like Stoppard’s “Player” in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), familiar enough with the conventions, rules, and subtleties of a variety of texts to be able to navigate successfully a world in which careers and relationships rise and fall on the turn of a phrase—digital or otherwise. Students with these skills will be the kind of *filters* of information our world increasingly needs.

### **The Word is Dead; Long Live the Word: Literature in the Digital Age**

Chapter 10 will focus more specifically on literature—really old and really new—and what place it might have in our curricular future. This chapter will also serve as a “conclusion” section, even though it will be my stated purpose in this book not to

“conclude”; this section, though it is the last, will mostly think about what we in curriculum studies, as well as teachers and students of literature and the humanities, will all do *next*, once we see through *revision* where we are, who we are, and what we can do about those things through and with words. As the chapter title implies, the word may die a “print” death, only to be given a “digital” life. To put it another way, it may be true, as Wendy Atwell-Vasey (1998) says, that “words have always been nourishment” (p. 1), but it looks like the ways in which they “nourish” us in the future may change.

I will begin by looking at the current state of literature, in terms of publishing, reading, writing, and teaching. My primary text for this section of the argument will be *Print is Dead* by Jeff Gomez (2008), a veteran of the publishing industry who seems surprisingly and interestingly optimistic about that death. I will also look at an opposing position in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (Birkerts, 1994), which laments the passing of long, slow, deep reading of print fiction. Also part of this discussion will be works from the many people interested in what digital literature can do and be, like N. Katherine Hayles’s (2008) *Electronic Literature*, Loss Pequeno Glazier’s (2002) *Digital Poetics*, and George P. Landow’s (2006) *Hypertext 3.0*. In addition I will explore the ways various writers of traditional, print literature have worked with these ideas, focusing on works like William Gibson’s (1984) *Neuromancer*, Ray Bradbury’s (1953) *Fahrenheit 451*, and poets like William Blake and Percy Shelley.

Vital to this discussion as well will be Mandelbrot’s (1983) ideas about iterative loops, as well as the much discussed “butterfly effect” of weather patterns. I will argue that literature in its analog and/or digital future will look like, and perhaps move and change just as dynamically as, the fractal, iterative, *feedback*-laden weather patterns so

fascinatingly hard to predict; such patterns, just like the weather, are in constant need of *revision*. And so, in short, if we are still going to figure out what it is, let alone teach it, we all need to become better weather forecasters. *Will our houses hold? Are we dressed correctly? Do we have the latest news?* And we will also need to go back to the beginning, before the digital, fractal storms approached, and see if the literature we always thought we knew and loved looks different now, with *revision*. This chapter will argue that the digitization of nearly everything may mean that we need to make an iterative loop, taking our 21<sup>st</sup>-century, digital-lit. output and using it as input for that class we've always taught—and the dissertation that has just “finished”—and see what the *feedback* produces.

*Chapter 1***Each Morning is a Gift: Poetry and the Need for *Revision* in Public Education**

I would like to begin by explaining, very briefly, how I got here. I was always good at math and science, growing up; they came pretty easy to me, and I appreciated the attention to details, the neatness and order, the confidence with which they seemed to be able to explain the world to me. But, as I got older, and consequently the world got messier, math and science (or at least the ways we used them) just did not seem *big* enough, anymore, to hold it all in; and despite the *smallness* of our approach to these fields, we seemed to ignore a lot of details that matter in those studies. I wanted to connect details, I could see what had to be sacrificed for neatness and order, and I was no longer convinced by that confidence. I didn't want to study spiders, for example; I wanted instead to be like Walt Whitman's "Noiseless Patient Spider," casting about "filament, filament, filament" (1892/1993, p. 556, line 4). I, too, wanted to be "ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the / spheres to connect" (p. 557, lines 8-9) the "oceans of space" (line 7) around me. In fact, I think it was this return to an old love of mine, poetry, that finally did it; I could see now, looking back at old favorites (*revising*), how poetry wanted to make small things big, to show us through each new tiny detail a world that is always bigger than we thought. Poetry suddenly seemed like the appropriate language for the world around me, the language of possibility and of *revision*; suddenly, "everyday language" did indeed seem to me like "a forgotten and therefore

used up poem,” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 205) and I found that “poetry is really what lets us dwell” (p. 213) here, *live* here, each day.

So, sometime during my sophomore year of college, I swapped to the humanities, and settled in the English department, attracted to literature primarily because it could be as *big* as I wanted it to be; as I often tell my students now, literature is the study of *everything*, and that is the way I teach it—like, I guess, a *noisy*, but still patient, spider. However, years later I discovered a field even bigger than literature, and therefore the place I was always headed: curriculum studies. Now, finally, it seems that everything is truly on the table (even science and math), the biggest questions are asked, the smallest details matter in the biggest contexts, and the real work is begun in understanding the world I live in and trying to share that understanding with the young people learning to participate in that world.

Having found, and loved, curriculum studies, I want to bring it into my classroom; lucky for me, I already teach the subject best suited to serve as an entry point for new discussions about why, and whom, and what, and how we teach and learn. Who speaks, and/or who is spoken to? What is said/not said, and how? These are the kinds of questions that drive curriculum studies—and also literature classes. And since both curriculum studies and literature can help us continually see the world with new eyes, I teach the perfect subject for *revision*. I teach the class that can remind us that the world will always remain full of possibilities, full of things to learn and do. And though I cannot teach “curriculum studies” in my high school, I try to make my literature courses as much the same kind of eye- and mind-opening experiences as I can. I teach, I hope, a class of *revision*, in which I and my students try to read, and write, and talk ourselves into



the world, reminded by bell hooks (1994) that “when the classroom is truly engaged, it’s dynamic . . . fluid . . . *always* changing” (p. 158, her italics). If I don’t continually *re-vise* myself and my work—see things again, new—how can I expect them to?

\*       \*       \*

### **Each morning is a gift**

Each morning is a gift,  
 Whether it is wrapped  
 In thin blues and greens,  
 Covered in blankets of  
 Whispering gray, or  
 Bathed in showers of  
 Blessed translucence.  
 But the ones I like best  
 Begin with deep color,  
 With new hues so  
 Full-blooded and rich  
 I am surprised at their  
 Boldness, the confidence  
 Of their voices, as if  
 The sky that is already  
 So vast, mysterious, limitless,  
 Is reminding me that it  
 Can be even more,  
 If it wants to,  
 And at any moment.

Each morning is a gift, a chance to start over, at least a little bit, to be a better husband, wife, sibling, student, teacher, friend—even if yesterday was a pretty good day. Each day is a chance to do what should have been done, say what should have been said, see what should have been seen. It is a chance for the *old* to become *new*, and even the subtle changes in the sunrise, in the way the world is lit, remind us that we have not seen it all yet, that there are possibilities even in the places (and mindsets) we have lived in for years; that the sky over our heads is not the same sky we saw yesterday, or the day

before, no matter how we take it for granted. In fact, it is never the same sky in the same way that it is never the same river we have stepped in before: countless, mostly invisible currents run through it, constantly interacting in ways not even the most brilliant scientists—or our local meteorologists—can accurately predict. And lest we forget, the world always turns in it, no matter how much we seem to want to stop just where we are sometimes. As Derrida tells us in answer to an interview question on James Joyce and iterability, each morning is a “yes,” a start, an “inauguration,” and “if tomorrow you do not reinvent today’s inauguration, you will be dead. So the inauguration has to be reinvented everyday” (Caputo, 1997, p. 28). Each morning is a gift, a chance for *revision* as in re-vision—a chance to see our work, ourselves, and our world again, new.

However, all too often, if we ever really *look* at these things, what we tend to do is *review*, not *revise*, and this is especially true in our schools. To use Alan A. Block’s (1988/1999) way of talking about it, we *re-read* when we ought to be *re-writing*, and “to live is to read texts, but to be alive is to write them” (p. 177). What we go through with our students when we “look back” at our curricular experience together is too often not much of an active, critical, performative process, but rather a re-peating of steps we have taken before, which lead us not to something new but back to the same spot. We review each fall the things learned in the previous spring; we review at the end of each semester the things we did at the beginning; we even review at the end of each unit the lessons that began it, which were sometimes only weeks or even days before.

All of this would be wonderful if we were *revising* that past curriculum, in the sense of looking back in order to figure out where to go next, or making those old lessons new again—that would be growth, and the very kind of *currere* Pinar (1975/1994) says

can allow us “to explore the complex relation between the temporal and the conceptual,” which “might disclose their relation to the Self and its evolution and education” (p. 19). This method is “regressive—progressive—analytical—synthetical” (p. 19); it is a careful, honest, thorough look at who we were, who we want to be, who we are, and how those things can come together. Unfortunately, what we have currently in education instead is “‘learning’ tied tightly, of course, to assessment and instruction. Even ‘curriculum’—presumably the content of learning—mutates to a means to the end that is assessment” (Pinar, 2006, p. 116). In other words, assessment today does not help us “run the course”; we run the course, memorize the “content” so that our memories of that “content” might be assessed. Our school work is simple where it should be complex, superficial when we ought to dig deep, faceless while our students look for individual identity, and closed in little marking bubbles when we ought to be opening up the world for them. We know what the all-important test will be like before we begin, so we simply prepare for the questions we know it will ask. As test time nears, we simply remind ourselves of how we have prepared; our nightmare is that something unexpected might happen, that we might be surprised at what tomorrow brings us. In the worst cases of such an approach to curriculum (today often called the most “successful”), we pre-test, teach, review, post-test; we script, tighten, clamp down on our students, teachers, and the learning they are supposed to be sharing, until we are sure that nothing new, different, interesting, or otherwise “disruptive” might happen.

It is not too late, though. We can *revise*, looking at our old ways of learning, writing, speaking, living, and finding new ones. And if we are interested in pursuing *revision*, we should start with our highest hurdle, our most difficult stumbling block:

ourselves. We will need new eyes to see a new world, but we open them each day if we want to. Each morning is a gift.

\* \* \*

### **Procrastination**

I don't want to write  
my autobiography,  
turn myself into  
something to be closed  
between two great, stiff  
covers and put on a shelf,  
concluded and contained,  
here today and hereafter.

I don't want to be a ghost yet,  
and only that when someone  
wants to be haunted, otherwise  
dead. Most of my life dead,  
past, gone. *Was*.

I want to move, change,  
contradict, be something  
tomorrow I wouldn't quite  
recognize today: me, still,  
but with a different look  
in the eye, little more oak  
in the voice, steadier hand.  
Better somehow,  
or at least more interesting,  
so that if that second flap  
of finality does swing around  
to catch me, I'll be someone  
worth putting a period after.

Until then, I'll be *out there*,  
trying to live a life that  
words can't hold.

I never wanted to be doing this, to be this “teacher” guy, to have this life. This is not to say that I do not enjoy my work, or that I did not enjoy learning; rather, I loved to learn, and I love to teach. I just did not associate these experiences with school very

much, and I liked it less as I got older. James B. Macdonald (1964/1995) says that “the function of the school is to challenge and stimulate the child’s creative encounter with reality” (p. 33), and I think he is right; however, if I had read Macdonald when I was sixteen, I would have thought he was crazy, or at least that he had not visited many schools. I was one of the students who counted the days until summer, who counted the minutes until the bell, who worked his imagination overtime to drown out the mind-numbing, routine *smallness* of it all. School to me was worksheets and waiting for life to start. It was an institution of “military-style uniformity, discipline, and authority coupled with a powerful nationalism and a stifling patriotic correctness” (Giroux, 2006, p. 26). It was the place where I was told when to stand, sit, speak, be silent, think, listen, eat, sleep (at home), and even when I could go to the bathroom, for which I had to have a “pass,” like I was being given special permission to break a rule. It was the anchor that held down dreams, visions, and hopes until their strength faded and they died, their last gasps played out in scratches on desks as a warning to all who would follow.

What I wanted to do was to cut loose from the shackles of words like “expectations” and “potential,” from other people’s plans for me, to be something different and dynamic; I wanted to not “fit” in the school the way it kept trying to force me to, to not be the “next” anything, but the “first” me, and I still squirm whenever someone feels like they have me figured out. I do not want to be figured out. And since teachers were the people who had *everything* figured out, or so I was told in a million different ways, I could not get out of school fast enough. I had no idea what I wanted to “be,” but I knew I did not want to be a “teacher.” (yes, with a period)

But now I see, in an act of *revision*, that I was often my own worst enemy, that I gave up when I could have fought, that I was waiting for someone to teach me when I could have been learning, studying, seeking out what I wanted, even in school—and that I was doing to the idea of education what the school was doing to me, taking my own small experience of it and assuming it to be the only experience of education, universal and unchanging. I did not see, to use William F. Pinar’s (2004) words, that “education is an opportunity offered, not a service rendered” (p. 5). I also see that there were two serendipitous moments from my high school years—the worst of my public school experience—that were perhaps the seeds of the life I live now, little cracks that let some light shine through. One of these events was the discovery of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in *The Portable Walt Whitman* (1945) on a surplus cart at the local library. I was mostly a science/math student, but I bought it for a quarter, on a whim, and it is on my shelves today. What I found in Whitman was a man untethered but tied to everything, a spider casting filament upon filament in longing for a connection to the world around him, a child who went forth and a man who took the open road. I found a man whose work was his life, and his life was a life of *revision*. His last edition of *Leaves of Grass* is fittingly called the “Deathbed Edition,” and I hear the lesson in that; I see, only now, why Whitman was the first poet I ever wanted to quote, and why I am still working with him.

The second event was an assignment to study William Blake in my senior British Literature class, the poet and artist chosen for me randomly from a list of “classic” authors. Everything I read about him confused me more, which is still true today. I went looking for all the things a proper “report” needs: dates of birth, marriage, and death, major publication dates, some little-known fact, etc. What I got instead was a man who

rewrote (*revised*) the entire universe to create his own original, working mythology, deciding ultimately that what had been done (the Bible, for example) did not really work for him. When he did use the same text the rest of us did, he still claimed it was different; it seems that we read “black” where he reads “white” (“The Everlasting Gospel,” section e, line 14). Jacob Bronowski (1978) calls Blake, in a perfect description, “an idealist with a sense of reality much broader than I had allowed for” (p. 3). How do you write a “report” on a man like that? You cannot, and I love that about him, that he just will not stand still long enough to be caught. I returned to Blake for an undergraduate honors thesis, and then again for a Master’s thesis project, and each time I found that my *vision* of his *vision* changed, as I am sure he would want it to.

Following the models of Whitman and Blake, I set out to live my own life, my own way, even if I had no idea what that way was. I realized more each day that it was a new day, and a new world; that no one else had lived my life or could tell me how to do it. I realized I could—and should—*revise* my life as I lived it, changing whatever I needed to change to move and act the way I wanted to in the world I found each morning. I also realized in college that school is not immune from such change, since nothing is, and that there are more ways than we can count to learn and decide what should be learned, there being more lives to live than we can imagine. Arjun Appadurai (2005) reminds us that even the good old “liberal arts” were not meant to be as dusty as we have made them: “they were intended . . . to widen the horizons, broaden the mental experiences, expand the imagination, and stretch the moral worlds of those exposed to them” (p. 434). Bronowski (1978, p. 143) says as well that “every work of art is an experiment in living,” which means that every book, every film, every painting or piece

of music is a chance to see the world differently—perhaps to start a new life, if the experiment goes well. And so I chose to go back to public school (regression, progression, analysis, synthesis) in order to go *for | word*, to do the work of *revision* in my own life and that of my students.

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### **Forsythia**

An explosion of ur-yellow  
 caught and held at the flashpoint,  
 nature glorious unruly asymmetric,  
 as untamed and untranslatable  
 as Whitman, growing  
 like jazz into the night.  
 And if I listen carefully  
 enough I swear I will  
 hear it sing in a rhythm  
 untaught a melody as yet unheard,  
 its own barbaric yawp,  
 sudden and free,  
 and one day I'll sing with it a  
 harmony only God could love.

But make no mistake—  
 He *will* love it.

I have always loved forsythia, certainly before I knew its name. In fact, I still don't know much about it, and I even forget about it for most of every year. To me, forsythia plants look like fireworks on pause; both, as well, are almost non-existent to me until I am startled at the noisy color of their explosions, and the effect of both is to make me feel as if I am looking at something I have never seen before. And yet, if I look hard enough, I feel like I can almost see something underneath the surface beauty of flowering chaos; I feel when I see the often-ignored stems of forsythia or the drifting ghost-smoke-mist trails of fireworks that I am looking at, well, blueprints of a sort.



I get much the same feeling reading the work of Whitman, especially the sprawling, seemingly unpredictable and maybe un-premeditated verses of his longer works, and I am not surprised to find out that he had this to say of structure in poetry:

The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws, and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs and roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges, and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form. (1855/1995, p. 266)

When I began to become a more experienced musician in college, I also came to appreciate this kind of structure in certain types of jazz and other music; I sometimes found in listening to John Coltrane or Miles Davis, for example, that the musicians seemed to be playing to some underlying design of which I was not aware. In fact, in those moments I would almost swear that any second the song might unravel entirely, leaving only a cacophonous mess; of course, such songs only *appeared* to have no structure, and this unraveling never actually happened. I found myself immensely attracted to such a flirtation with chaos, and while my band and I could not play jazz, we did work tirelessly on Cream's (1968/1995) version of "Crossroads," in which the simple blues structure is only implied for significant sections of the song, and the fuzzy, tumultuous near-crash of the instruments after the chorus is yanked suddenly back from the brink by the next verse. I think much of the excitement of music like this is due to the fact that the structure is occasionally hidden from the listener in such a way that it sounds new and fresh—*revised*—when it returns to the surface of the song. I know it was exciting to try and pull it off.

While I don't know if Benoit Mandelbrot (1983) listened to jazz while he wrote *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, or liked to watch fireworks or look at forsythia, I do know that his fractal computer creations give me much the same feeling. Mandelbrot claims that "many patterns of Nature are so irregular and fragmented, that, compared with . . . standard geometry . . . Nature exhibits not simply a higher degree but an altogether different level of complexity" (p. 1), and so he has devised a more dynamic mathematical way of understanding aspects of our messy world that have looked for so long like they cannot be understood. Such findings have led scholars like Yuriy Baryshev and Pekka Teerikorpi (2002) to say that Mandelbrot "unexpectedly opened our eyes to hidden structures surrounding us everywhere" (p. 229) and showed us that "apparently chaotic phenomena may have deep structure" (p. 231).

Interestingly, William J. Jackson (2004) says in *Heaven's Fractal Net* that "most people cannot see patterns in their fields of vision and experience," like those studied by fractal geometry, unless they follow closely the work of "original thinkers, poets, seers" who "have a more direct experience of images as their source of knowledge" (p. 185). My own experience of teaching poetry to high school seniors has actually borne this out, time and again. When I teach a chapter of poems from our anthology, I make very few detailed plans about where to start or finish, and I scarcely have any specific ideas about what I or my students might say; as Pinar (1972/1994) would put it, "although I have a general notion of what I am up to, I make no preliminary sketches" (p. 7). Sometimes I simply open up the floor to whomever would like to begin our day's discussions; sometimes I call on someone at random for a comment or question about one of the poems—but whatever I do to get things started, I have very little idea what we will be

talking about when the bell rings to end the class. However, over the years, I have discovered that very few of these days end up being a “waste of time”; rather, literary themes, meanings of words, life experiences, personal stories, relationships between works and authors all swirl about the room in what is often a beautiful, stimulating, associative, connective, *fractal* mix far more useful and relevant to all of us than anything I could devise ahead of time and on my own.

Perhaps this is because “literature and the arts are like fractals (which exist between dimensions) in that they guide us into the dimensions between realms—between personal and social, between agony and ecstasy” (Jackson, 2004, p. 256). Sometimes these discussions, inspired by *poetry* rather than a “lesson plan” I have devised *about poetry*, help us to see the “deep structures” that exist between us, but we could not see before; they help us, like fractals, *revise* our world. In fact, I have found that the less I impose my own pre-determined structure on the day’s work, the more these “deep structures” become apparent and can be explored. Having been a part of this kind of experience so many times now, I am not a bit surprised to find that Pinar (1972/1994) approaches teaching “similar to the way Pollock approached painting”—or that Pollock’s paintings have been studied by physicists for the “fractal dimension of the patterns on the canvas” (Baryshev & Teerikorpi, 2002, p. 245). I bet Mandelbrot would not be surprised either. Or Whitman, for that matter.

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### **Love and Hate**

I guess you can hate words  
 If you love them too,  
 Because when I can’t find  
 The right one I feel like

My eardrums might burst  
 At the sound of someone,  
 Anyone, speaking, and I  
 Can't explain the grating,  
 The piercing the words cause  
 Because then I'd have to use  
 Them and just make it worse.

To Write: why? If it is just  
 Going to mean loss of  
 Soul to paper, minutes with  
 Loved ones, work in the yard,  
 Just for—what, exactly?  
 A snapshot in ink to  
 Hold in the face of time?

Sometimes I think I would  
 Stop if I could. But even  
 When I try, I can feel the  
 Pen in my pocket, see in  
 My mind the corner where  
 The notebooks are hidden.

My students almost invariably groan when I talk to them about *revising* their papers, as if it causes them actual physical pain to re-examine their syntax or worry over their word choice and tone. And while it must be done, groaning or no groaning, I understand their dread of the task: I feel their pain, to try to reinvigorate the cliché. Writing hurts, physically and emotionally, and I am not immune no matter how much I write, nor do I think anyone really is. I ache, I sweat, I tense when I write, as if I were trying to sculpt myself out of ink. I feel the pain of Merleau-Ponty's (1968) *Flesh*, of "a body that is integrated with the mind, and enmeshed within experience" (Springgay & Freedman, 2007, p. xx). I feel the pressure when Lacan tells me that "the 'I' . . . exists in/through language" (Roseboro, 2008, p. 63), worried that I somehow won't get myself right. And since writing is painful enough, *revision* can be like torture for many of us. Something about writing seems so permanent, in the sense that what is said cannot then

be unsaid, as if we are forced to wear our words like tattoos forever. This idea is somehow surviving even in this technological age, where letters typed with one key are just as easily erased with another, and most writing is ephemeral at best, often seeming to last far less time than it took to create. For example, the hours I take saying these things just the right way will likely dwarf the time anyone takes to read them. Writers also take their work so personally, and are often insulted when asked to revise it. Here they are intuiting, I think, that we are what we write, and that life is as we write it, that while “reading is the process by which a reality is consumed,” the act of “writing is the very production of that reality” (Block, 1988/1999, p. 177). The freedom to produce and act on reality is wonderful, but it is also scary, and full of pressure, especially when the students are teenagers who spend a lot of the day doubting themselves anyway.

And as for “freedom” itself, Michael W. Apple (2005) points out that “concepts such as freedom are sliding signifiers” that have “no fixed meaning” (p. 344), and this slippery property of words is another part of the pain of writing and revision. No matter how much time and effort are devoted to writing, somehow what is written is never *exactly* what we wanted to say, or all of it. Sometimes we are restricted by form, or rules, or an assignment, but even without these guidelines the words we use are never good enough. They are not *it*, but rather a *representation of it*, and that distance, that slipperiness sends our students again and again for the thesaurus, sure that *the right word* is out there somewhere, and they just have not found it yet. Eventually, due dates remind us all that we are forced to settle for something never-quite-right in the end, and we turn our work in anyway. But to be asked to *revise*, to have to return to this work, to do again what hurt the first time and turn it into something new—it is no wonder they groan.

Besides, looking back at the person we wrote into existence before, even if we are given the chance to understand him better or even change him to be the person we want him to be, can be an uncomfortable experience, like being asked to critique your middle school pictures for a grade:

### **Phaethon**

The hum of daylight  
when you're not ready for it.  
I rise, stumble, head full  
and empty and heavy,  
and the window shows me  
that Saturday's electric sun  
is really my father  
working.

I am stronger than he is  
(in the way that I know strength),  
teenage athlete, capable.  
Unmasked.  
And I know, but  
cannot figure out how to express  
it, or return it, despite that  
medal the school gave me—  
I know that I am loved.

I roll over and sleep until adulthood,  
hoping to awake a man,  
hoping that man will have the  
answers this boy does not,  
hoping I can learn to take  
Hyperion's reigns  
and light the world for him.

If we are growing as we should, learning each day to improve on the person we were the day before, we may not want to look back, to re-expose those sins and weaknesses to the light which we have worked so hard to try and overcome. But we cannot stop writing ourselves, lest we become mired in today's sins and weaknesses. Each morning is a gift, but it is also a responsibility to meet that newness in good faith, to *revise*. Besides, the

words are not permanent, and not meant to be, and maybe the Myth of the Permanence of Words is something technology will help us deconstruct; maybe it will remind us how malleable and versatile they can be, freeing us to write like we are always writing on “scratch paper.” We do not write in stone, after all, and cavemen would not have, either, if they had had laptops. The computers simply make clearer what has always been true: as J. H. Miller puts it in *Black Holes* (1999), “whatever is printed is always just one stage in a potentially endless process of revision, deletion, addition, and rearrangement” (p. 97). What is often seen as the weakness of language to say things *exactly* and *finally* is perhaps actually one of its great advantages; “these materials which are really signifiers are to be played with, torn apart, and reconstituted” (Block, 1988/1999, p. 194). Writing is built for *revision*, and so are we, which is to say that language is dynamic, and ready when we are to re-write and re-see the world new.

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### **A Short Interview about Poetry**

*Is your glass half-empty or half-full?*

Great God! What does it matter?  
 What’s next? *Is that a prayer*  
*Or a curse?* In the dark they’re  
 Just two sides of the same coin,  
 Aren’t they? And then what?  
*Rosencrantz or Guildenstern?*  
*Heads or tails?*  
 Answers, answers. I think  
 You’re missing it there,  
 Horatio. After all,  
 Sagacity is just articulate  
 Guessing.

Ahem.

The glass:

Religion says God gave it to me,  
 Science says I made it myself.  
 Music wants to break it;  
 Philosophy doubts it's really there.  
 And it holds:  
 Hemlock? Ambrosia? Vodka? Water?  
 If it's not all four, I'm not  
 Interested.  
 You see, there are blanks—  
 Glorious, messy spaces to breathe, imagine—  
 That can't be filled in any  
 Way that will stick.

What if I told you that  
 If I let go of my pen,  
 It might not fall,  
 Gravity being simply expressive  
 Of mankind's tendency toward  
 Pessimism?

Today might be the day, you know.

One of the real tricks to helping our students see the need for *revision* is to teach them to love the very gaps and spaces current educational policy and attitudes are trying to eradicate, or at least ignore. The world is simply not as *finite*, as *decided* as we often tell our students it is—but this is a great thing. We know that at the very roots, all that we do, and say we “know,” is a matter of theory, faith, and extremely educated guesses, and we can face what Mary Aswell Doll (2006) calls this “lostness” (Doll, Wear, & Whitaker, p. 173) with fear, apprehension, or denial, or we can see it as room for *revision*. Either way, those gaps are there, in every field, between the world and what we know about it, between ourselves and each other—or in the case of writing, between our ideas and the words on the page. If we choose, those gaps can be wonderful, “Glorious, messy spaces to breathe, imagine,” places to *be* and *act* in ways that are not yet determined. As Doll



says, “In the gap, we can go to work. We can think. We can dwell” (p. 173). And a great way to explore the “gap” is through poetry.

Most works of literature mask these gaps with elaborate detail of plot or character, or in the case of visual forms like television and film, by telling us “*this* is what he looks like; *this* is what he does.” But even in these forms, we know, if we are paying attention, that the gaps are still there, that the film can be remade and recast, that every reader’s imagination of a text—no matter how detailed—varies according to desire, experience, etc. Literature liberates us by “refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text” (Barthes, 1977, p. 147)—by leaving gaps. Poetry, though, foregrounds the gap. The poem says to us “look how much you do not know about me,” and this is true every time we read it. And because the gaps are so obvious in a poem, so *there* on the page, we put so much of our own ideas, our own associations in it that each poem is a different poem to each person who reads it.

One way poetry foregrounds the gap and leaves itself open to our interpretation is by using words in a much “fuller” way than we do in normal speech; the editors (Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson) of *Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense* (8<sup>th</sup> edition), the anthology I use with my seniors, tell us that, for example, “the poet will often take advantage of the fact that the word has more than one meaning by using it to mean more than one thing at the same time” (2002, p. 759). In this way, poets do not cut off, limit, or nail down words or ideas to one meaning, but rather connect, expand, and set free words and ideas; they do not use “a fraction of the word and throw away the rest,” but rather “use as much of the word as possible” (p. 762), reminding us that words mean lots of things and can make us think of lots of things. Through metaphor, through a

“full” use of words, poets ask us to constantly *revise* their work and what the words mean, seeing things each time that we missed before; as William E. Doll, Jr., puts it, “metaphors are open, heuristic, dialogue-engendering,” and we need to “encourage our students to explore with us the possibilities that can be generated from dialogue with the text” (1993, p. 169). Through poetry that is inexhaustible we see a world that is inexhaustible, and understand that both can change as our “readings” of them do. Harold Bloom (1975/2003) recognizes this characteristic of our relationship with literature and says that every act of “strong” reading is an act of “misreading or misprision”; his use of the “mis-” prefix simply foregrounds the distance always there between what the author meant and what we hear, since literary criticism is “always an act of deciding, and what it tries to decide is meaning” (p. 3). This means that “reading is therefore miswriting” (p. 3). In other words, we not only *read* poems, but also *write* them, to echo Block’s (1988/1999) language.

What poetry points out to us is that “the books we read, the music we hear, the people we touch, and the technologies that we use are not external to, but intertwined with the body” (Gaudelius & Garoian, 2007, p. 13). We become part of it, and it becomes part of us. Because we are all different people reading the same poem differently, what can result in discussions about poetry is the very kind of multiplicity of perspectives that we need in the “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2004, p. 196) of education today. It will not be easy—just as it is not easy to teach poetry—to dive headlong into the gap, into Pinar’s “complicated conversation,” into Doll’s (2006) “confusion” and “dis-ease” (Doll et al., p. 16), especially as we live and work in a system of cut-and-dried answers Delese Wear says is developed from “insecurity and the need to

control” (p. 43). But dive we must, if we want room for *revision*, even if we are not sure where we might end up. Roland Barthes (1977) says that “in the teaching space nobody should anywhere be in his place” (p. 206); perhaps to find our own personal way in life we need to get lost a little first.

### **Humidity**

Awake in a cloud, or smoke,  
Or potato soup, for all I know.  
Locked in a downy cell,  
Or adrift, my own little pine-tree icemass  
Of suburbia exiled in the night  
From the comfort of the  
Nice Neighborhood Nation.

There is something disconcerting about fog,  
But especially on Sundays,  
Like rain on Easter,  
Or a late December heatwave.  
Frustration, confusion, fear  
Of things  
Not lining up *as they should*.  
I am normally thankful  
For any day of clarity, no matter  
When it visits me on the calendar  
(who’s to say when Sunday comes,  
after all?),  
but it’s easier to sing the song of the spheres  
if you can hear it with your own ears  
once in a while.

But then,  
I must admit the limits  
Of my capacity for clarity.  
Too much cloudless sky  
Burns the earth, dries our souls,  
Peels my layers in the heat,  
Cracks me open in the cold,  
Exposes me  
Too much, too fast,  
Sends me seeking the dark, the wet,  
The shade, the saturation.

Maybe I need the moisture—  
 Maybe we all do.  
 Maybe in the fog, when I can't see,  
 I see myself—  
 Maybe.

Besides, “con-fusion” and “dis-ease” are important parts of the intentions of curriculum, anyway. As Doll (2006) says, “curriculum workers should, at the very least, unseat the ready expectations” of our students; we should “take them for a ride. Unmoor the anchor. Set sail” (Doll et al., p. 27). Block (1997) also says the “process of education” ought to “make the familiar unfamiliar” (p. 92). This approach to education is appropriate in a world in which we “do not have definable meanings” (Caputo, 1997, p. 31) for so many things and our very identities are changing all the time. This changing identity is something else of which poetry reminds us; as we change, it changes, and a poem we read as a child is not the same one we read as a teenager, and it is certainly a different text again when we become adults. As Doll (2006) emphatically reports, “what I was like forty years ago has absolutely no meaning for what I am like today!” (Doll et al., p. 16). The work of *revision*, then, within the classroom and without, is vital to our efforts to live and work in a world that changes every day. Such dynamic, fluid identities in a dynamic, fluid world also mean that even if we wanted to “remain the same,” trying to hold on to the person we were and the world we knew, the weaknesses of memory would likely make our efforts futile:

### **Smoke**

I worry I'm losing it—  
 the past I mean,  
 like I'm on fire and  
 have to watch yesterdays  
 twist and turn and  
 flutter away on the smoke,

straining to once more  
 catch them, re-enter  
 my own skin, see through  
 younger eyes, shift awkwardly  
 in the faux green leather  
 of that Applebee's booth,  
 feel the air move from the  
 rustle of the hem of  
 her white hippie shirt,  
 try to bring myself to  
 look into those eyes,  
 until I have to remind  
 myself that what matters  
 is that those eyes are  
 still blue.

### Memory

For me, it usually goes  
 something like this:  
 Open facing a street I know,  
 except swap that store for  
 the old one, the coffeeshop  
 for the one I haunted. Remove  
 various beautification efforts.

Insert me as I am, but  
 change the shirt, the hair,  
 the walk. Well, not the shirt.  
 Run me into faces with fuzzy  
 edges, listen to snippets, like  
 a conversation of only non sequiturs.

What is that, exactly? Convincing,  
 sure. Probable, even. I'd bet  
 there are people who, if they  
 saw it in a photograph, would  
 swear they remember that day.  
 The good times.

We don't make it all up, do we?

What we have here is a gap as well, between *who we are* and *who we were*, today  
 and yesterday, that grows as time passes, and makes the edges of those poles grow

fuzzier as well. What we mean when we talk about “yesterday” is not some *thing* but rather our *memory of the thing*; we are already swimming in the gap of the signifier/signified relationship even before we try and put these things in words—which in the case of memories only further the distance. As Madeleine R. Grumet (1980/1999) tells us, “the event-in-itself defies re-presentation, slipping away from our grasp like the landscape outside the window of a railway car” (p. 25). And even if we could conquer the time between, we would still find that the *thing* we are re-calling is not all there; we are forever hindered by our “inability to totally absorb the experience of real life” (Weaver & Britt, 2007, p. 33). In other words, whether we embrace it or not, we are already lost, and any act of *re-membering* is really an act of *re-visioning*.

If we accept this necessity of *revision* when it comes to memory, though, and understand it as a performative process much like the interpretation of a text, which “transforms what it interprets,” we are empowered; interpretation “changes the world, in however small a way, by changing once and for all an element of that world that has power to make things happen” (J. H. Miller, 2001a, p. 108). And since “the world is an interpreted world” (D. G. Smith, 1988/1999, p. 117), we must interpret, we must *revise*, to act in it, and on it, anyway—and we must remember, in the case of history especially, that others *revise* as well, so that we do not mistake accounts of their memories for “fact.” If we do participate critically, responsibly, and thoughtfully in such processes of *revision*, we may find that the past *revised* carefully can be useful for the present and maybe future, enabling us to look back with the wisdom of today at the experience of yesterday, seeing connections and meanings and subtle revelations that were not available at the time. We can live better today, because of yesterday. Each morning is a gift.

### **What it Meant**

I used to wonder why Mister  
Rogers always changed his shoes  
When he came home, but now

I think it's because he had  
A job, and at work he was  
Just that loser Fred, who

Can't speak up in meetings and  
Packs his own lunch every morning  
To eat at his desk alone. So stick

*That* guy in the *closet*, because  
Here in the neighborhood  
He's a god, a benevolent puppet  
Master in comfortable shoes, or

At least a king, all cool calm  
Command in a sweater-vest robe,  
And it's all castles and blue skies

As far as the mind's eye can see.  
Funny how I used to think that  
Was a kids' show, before I knew

What it meant to be a man.

### **Vacation Bible School**

I've read about manna from Heaven, sure,  
but it was never real to me unless  
I thought of homemade ice cream

churned by that funny machine that  
almost works, watched over by the men  
and their bags of ice

and served by the women in green  
cafeteria mugs to be eaten  
with the clanking of spoons

mingled with the sounds of horseshoes,  
clapping screen doors, and weather-warped

ping-pong.

And in those brief moments between,  
Where the quiet ushers in pine breezes  
That mix with the vanilla trying to melt  
Before you can eat it,

I understand.

\* \* \*

My wife and I started restoring old furniture years ago. We did so at first out of necessity; we were both in college when we were dating, and we married just before going to graduate school, and though we were both pretty good at managing money, there was very little money to manage. Rather than pile up credit card debt, we decided to take what we could get and turn it into something more whenever we could. So, we took whatever hand-me-down pieces of furniture our relatives offered, and also combed through yard sales—and pieces left on the curb, quite frankly—for things in which we could see little glimmers of possibility, no matter the work it would take to realize those possibilities. Eventually, though, the work of *revision* took hold of us, and we still get the vast majority of our furniture this way. There is something special about giving old things new life, taking what is worn, damaged, neglected, forgotten, or broken, and helping it become something beautiful. Now we only want to spend our lives surrounded by interesting difference, uniqueness, personality, weathered dignity—life as it could be, with *revision*.

Did I mention that we are both teachers?

### **Resurrection**

I have heard of people  
Frightened of furniture,  
And I believe it,



Because wood is  
Holy.  
God is in there.  
First in trees tall, stoic,  
Then in altar, pew, instrument, cross;  
But also in house, chair, table, bed.  
Beauty cut down  
But also reformed,  
Made new.  
Yes, that's right:  
Resurrected.  
Look closely at the grain,  
Brown and gold river of soul  
Running just under glassy sheen.

No day can be the same  
After this.

*Chapter 2***Singing the Song of the Open Road: Walt Whitman and Curriculum**

*“Healthy, free, the world before me,  
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose”  
(Song of the Open Road, 1892/1993, lines 2-3)*

When I look at the strategies, emphases, and requirements laid out in discussions of the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, I do not see, as many educators seem to these days, the root of many of our current problems in the classroom. What I see in all this focus on “accountability” is simply the next in a series of logical steps, a mere symptom of an illness that pervades all arenas of culture in the United States: a way of looking at the world that I call *smallness*. Disney and others have it right; it is a “small world,” and it does seem to be getting smaller all the time, at least in the way we currently think of it.

This *smallness* is, in some obvious ways, geographic and physical, though it is not just that. When we say the world is shrinking, we certainly do not mean that the area, volume, or any other measure of the earth’s physical size is somehow diminishing; we mean that the metaphorical distances, as well as actual miles, between peoples and cultures are not so great or so difficult to traverse as they once were. Due to rapid and recent technological advances, almost any spot on the globe is reachable in a day’s travel, and information about that place’s ideas, religious beliefs, and social practices can be experienced almost instantly through a variety of media.

What this new technology has done, unfortunately, is make us accustomed to almost instant satisfaction of our desires, academic or otherwise, so much so that we are willing to accept questionable-at-best bits (literally or figuratively in the computer age), fragments, small pieces of a much bigger picture that we may never see. Religions that have weathered thousands of years are reduced to an exotic image, a few key tenets, and a celebrity endorsement. Important and complicated international positions are reduced to “good” and “evil”. And at school, when we should be offering up to our students an open world ripe for exploration, we give them quadratic equations, or dangling participles. If we want to help our students experience instead the type of *currere* and autobiography that Pinar advocates (1975/1994)—and I think *that* is our job—we need to *revise* our approach to schooling and our understanding of curriculum. We need to first show them that the world is, in fact, quite large, and still holds plenty of space for them to explore, to become. The great thing about a flawed perspective is that it can be changed. We also have, in our literature classes, a place to begin changing that perspective. For example, perhaps we should look at the work of someone like nineteenth-century poet Walt Whitman, in particular his “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” “There Was a Child Went Forth,” and “Song of Myself,” to begin to discuss other ways to think of what our public school can do and be; perhaps the poet of the Open Road could breathe some fresh air into the “artificial confinement” (Slattery & Daigle, 1994, p. 443) of our pretty Closed Curriculum.

### **Walt Whitman: Old Ideas for a New Time**

It is certainly no trick to find people who feel like education in the United States is in dire straits; in fact, it is much harder to find anyone who thinks that the system is just

fine as it is. However, while most agree that our system is broken, we have a much harder time agreeing about what broke it, let alone figuring out what to do next. The villains that appear in conversations about the state of our schools are almost innumerable: lack of funding, under-qualified teachers, unsupportive administrations, lazy and spoiled students, poor parenting, too much/not enough computer use, television, music, video games—no one is immune from blame. But the most popular whipping boy lately is the purported political savior of our school system, the No Child Left Behind Act. I know teachers who bristle at the mere mention of the words, and I understand why, though I think we misapply our anger. The NCLB Act, particularly its focus on “accountability” and standardized testing, is a political band aid, and lest we forget, band aids do not heal wounds. At best, they cover them so that they do not get worse. Healing comes from within. But before we can heal our wounded approach to curriculum, we must gain a clear understanding of its injuries.

Let us begin with the obvious, to anyone who works in a school building: “Schools are, generally speaking, intellectually boring places, uninteresting both for the students compelled to attend them and for adults hired to work in them” (Clifford & Friesen, 2003, p. 92). Before the first word is spoken in a normal school day, there is the very experience of being in school tainting it. If eight forced, rigidly segmented hours in a cinder-block building with few windows, uncomfortable plastic furniture, fluorescent lighting, and often unpredictable heating and cooling controlled by a computer in another state sounds intellectually stimulating to anyone, I have not met him. And let us keep in mind that the school I describe here, my own, is one of our most well-maintained, not our

worst. However, though the setting of education in the United States is discouraging at best, what happens in those rooms is often even more “uninteresting”.

The picture of the world we offer to our children at school is much like the oversized maps on a classroom wall: flat, pre-marked, color-coded, full of mysteriously drawn boundaries, and able to be rolled back up into an unobtrusive casing when we wish it to be. But even this world, we fear, is too much, so we carve it into a puzzle that we might show our students one piece at a time. And then, because we are afraid of what our children will be able to make of the rough edges and odd protrusions, we round the pieces off, until what we finally present in our classrooms is something no one recognizes, not even us. Too many students graduate every year, after thousands of days of accumulating these isolated pieces, with not much more than extra, meaningless weight.

What the NCLB Act has done, really, is to take this situation and hold us all more “accountable” for it, not ask if education should or could mean something different entirely, something bigger. The Act merely chooses which isolated pieces must be presented, the same pieces for all students, and then tests our students often to make sure they still carry those pieces. The questions it asks are *small* questions about a world it sees as *small*, and so of course the answers seem *small*, too, and all aimed at one federally-sponsored goal: preparing an excellent work force. As Henry Giroux says, this policy of education “can be understood as part of a wider attempt by conservatives to expand the power of capital, individual competitiveness, and corporate control and regulation” (2003, p. 78), leaving us with a “view of public education as largely an adjunct of the business community” (p. 79). When the most powerful, most capitalist, most technological country in the world acquires its power largely through its capitalism

and technological prowess, we should not be surprised that its culture, schools included, becomes increasingly commodified, reduced to sellers and consumers of “product”. Administrators become CEOs worried about the bottom line, teachers become salespeople of a product they do not much believe in, and students are abstracted into demographics. At the end of the year, no one asks me about emotional connections, sudden realizations, or empowering breakthroughs; I am issued a chart and instructed to fill in the numbers of A’s and F’s next to categories like “white males,” and “black females.” The most telling in terms of our world’s current *smallness* is the “Asian” section of the chart—half of the world’s population, complete with its great diversity of cultures, religions, and ways of life, reduced to two blocks on an Excel spreadsheet.

It is true that our new tests treat students “as if they were empty containers to be measured, stamped, and processed” (Giroux, 2003, p. 90), that “we live in a world that is more and more about the measurable productivity of our prescribed, standardized work” (O’Quinn & Garrison, 2006, para. 1). But it is also true that this is precisely the kind of world we have repeatedly asked for, and continue to ask for, since Sputnik was launched in 1957. As William F. Pinar (2004) has outlined thoroughly, turning education into a field of competition profoundly changed the direction of our schools. Once school curriculum, and much of life really, became a competitive endeavor, it had to be “nailed down,” so to speak; it had to have specific content, strict guidelines, measurable progress, and united, standardized goals. Over 50 years later, here we are, exactly where we aimed to be.

However, it is precisely this “nailed down” characteristic of education, this *smallness*, that ruins the school experience for so many. David W. Jardine sums up this

problem well in his “basics-as-breakdown” discussion (2003). We treat each lesson (or “lessen” as he calls it), as an “isolated curricular fragment” (2003, p. 11). Because of time and content restraints, no “fragment” is given much time or depth. And because they are fragments, no single one really deserves time or depth, anyway. As a result, we move faster and faster toward nothing but a test deadline, experiencing very little of worth along the way. Though we took this road in U.S. education hoping to secure our place in the world, David A. Gruenewald has ironically found that our system has “kept people from learning what was really going on, from confronting essential facts of life, from experiencing it passionately and considering it critically” (2002, *Classroom in society*, para. 3). In addition, our “specialized, disciplinary inquiry often works against wholeness and integration” (2002, *Wholeness*, para. 2). In other words, not only are our students increasingly detached from the world around them, but our method of education might ensure that their knowledge of the world will always be as “fractured” (para. 2) as the school-day schedule. Moreover, in education-as-business, with corporations sponsoring and sometimes driving education reforms (Giroux, 2003), we set up “good jobs” as the ultimate goal of study for our students. But in this business model of education, “if the promise of the school lies in jobs and financial success” (Block, 1997, p. 15), what happens to learning when their career prospects are limited, or unsatisfying?

But there are voices in education that call for real change in thinking about the purpose of education and the nature of the curriculum, not just its methods and content; these voices call for us to seriously reconsider why we educate our young in the first place, and what that education should mean. And, perhaps surprisingly, these voices are not all new ones—some of them spoke long before Sputnik. So we may have to go

backward first, as Pinar (1975/1994) recommends, to decide our next steps in public education curriculum, and use our past to guide our future.

To see how much the *course* of education in the United States was altered by the space race and capitalist competition, and to maybe find some *re-course*, one need only look at the work of early-twentieth-century philosopher John Dewey, which focused on “an integrated early childhood curriculum,” the importance of “integration of knowledge and experience,” the “fallacy of focusing on isolated subject matter,” and the “importance of child-initiated, self-directed activity” (Waqar, 2000, Images of curriculum, para. 3). Pinar also advocates a more child-centered approach, believing that education “is an opportunity offered, not a service rendered” (2004, p. 5). Pinar rejects our current focus on testing, arguing that although “one can hardly be opposed to higher test scores, it is self-reflexive interdisciplinary intellectuality—the cultivation of ‘original thought’—that constitutes curriculum theorists’ aspiration for the process of education” (p. 20). Pinar insists that we must turn from our current path in education, we must “remember that education is not a business, that it cannot be measured by test scores, that it is too important to be left to either politicians or parents” (p. 61).

According to Pinar, part of what makes curriculum (correctly understood, anyway) so untestable, so immeasurable, is that it is “a conversation among the participants, one which supports and explores the possibilities of unpredicted and novel events, unplanned destinations, conversation which incorporates life history and politics and popular culture as well as official, institutional, bureaucratized knowledge” (2004, p. 224). What Pinar describes is part of the answer to our perception of the world’s *smallness*: a curriculum that is as open and large and complex as the world it is meant to



uncover for students. Such a curriculum would be more *fractaled* than *fractured*; it would be dynamic, associative, rough-edged, and connective rather than stable (stagnant), dissociative, and full of artificially smooth pieces disconnected from both each other and the rest of the world. James B. Macdonald (1964/1995) likewise calls for this openness, this largeness of educational experience:

To be open in thought—fluent, flexible and original; and open in affect—experiencing the potential feelings in an activity; and open in perception—meeting the potential stimuli in the world: these are the ways to maximum development of human potential. (p. 20)

And to be open to the world as an educational opportunity, to see relationships and connections among all that we experience in and out of the classroom, is to recognize that the world is “an interpreted world” which “can be interpreted differently” (D. G. Smith, 1988/1999, p. 117). In other words, to see that the world is, despite the popular perception, still a big world, to see that it is open for new connections, new pathways of experience and identity, new *revisions*, to see that it is in many ways still a *potential* world being made new all the time, is to understand that life—despite our many efforts to cut it off, break it into fragments, dumb it down, reduce it to isolated pieces—is still full of promise and ready for participation. And this way of looking at life in our world is what Walt Whitman spent his own life trying to teach us so many years ago.

### **“When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”**

Though he is not usually considered a curriculum theorist, Walt Whitman was himself a school teacher, for a time in his youth, though I would argue that his most important contributions to the idea of life-as-educational-experience came later through

his poetry. Biographers tell us that Whitman held roughly eight teaching posts in small country schools between 1836 and 1841 (Callow, 1992, p. 40), also reminding us that his frequent job changes were common in his time, and are not necessarily a reflection of poor teaching skill. In fact, most accounts find him to have been “an excellent teacher,” as reported by even his own brother, George, who Callow notes was “not one to compliment his brother lightly” (p. 40). The general endorsement of his students perhaps deserves even more weight when school conditions are taken into account. Though the schools Whitman worked in were not today’s highly controlled, sterilized, standardized institutions, they still presented their own set of difficulties. For one, most instructors had little training, and were not much older than their students; Whitman himself went to no teacher college, though Callow notes that “his self-education at home and the general knowledge he had picked up in newspaper offices” (p. 39) made him better qualified than many other teachers. Despite the six-day, eight-to-four hours and “single classroom filled with boys and girls whose ages ranged from five or six to sixteen” (Rubin, 1973, p. 34), Whitman seems to have flourished, breaking up lessons with games and the occasional trip outside for baseball and using very little in the way of physical discipline.

However, it is Whitman’s poetry that made him famous, not his career in public education, unless one thinks of *Leaves of Grass*, as I tend to, as an expansion of his classroom to include all of his reading audience. It is precisely this breaking down of classroom walls that he explores in his poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” (1892/1993), which features in its eight lines a speaker who grows “tired and sick” during an astronomer’s lecture and leaves the room to go outside to look at the stars.

However, it is important to note here that while Whitman is known for his “free” writing style, he is not quite a metrical anarchist. The poem, which seems to reject the rigid science and sometimes artificial structure of the lecture format of study, uses a sort of structure itself, dividing the lines into two sections of four. The first four lines begin with “When” and describe the setting and set the stage for the reaction that is described in the last four lines. This is not the contradiction it might seem; Whitman believed in structure, so long as it is used for some greater purpose and does not supplant that purpose. Whitman’s pattern and structure were those of beauty and nature, not bureaucracy; he believed that “rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems” should “bud from them as loosely as lilacs and roses on a bush” (1855/1995, p. 266).

The form Whitman employs for this poem expresses perfectly the attitude and feeling of the speaker, brought on by the experience of the astronomer’s lecture. The four *When*’s are overwhelming in their repetition, underscoring “the thematic and static unity of the learned astronomer’s lecture-room” (Gold, 2004, p. 225), promising over and over what they finally do not deliver and try to make up for with a piling on of data. It is important also to note that it is not necessarily the science itself which the speaker rejects; after all, one does not often go to the opera without an appreciation for its specific way of looking at music. The speaker also says that the reason for his sickness is “unaccountable” (line 5), and someone who did not like science would certainly know why he wanted to leave a scientific lecture. Rather, it seems to be the *smallness* of the lecture that turns off the poem’s speaker and sends him out into the “mystical moist night-air” (line 7).

We read books to experience lives that are not ours; we study history to move outside the boundaries of our time; and we likely began to study the stars in order to get closer to those mysterious lights in the sky. When the speaker attends the lecture perhaps expecting a connection across unfathomable miles, an expansion of his living and knowing space, he is instead met with “proofs” and “figures” that are “ranged in columns” (line 2) and is shown “the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure” (line 3). In short, he is shown the “mystical” night reduced and abstracted, in just the same way that our current school system turns the earth into a color-coded pull-down map, and whole, complicated people into demographics to be labeled “black” or “Asian.” He is “tired and sick” (line 5) in much the same way our students hate school and have trouble saying exactly why. Perhaps, like him, our students have “simply had it with accountability, with accounting anything, with counting, with adding, with dividing, with measuring” (Gold, 2004, p. 226). As Moshe Gold says, this poem “confronts us with what may be our illusory expectations of education” (p. 224). At least Whitman’s speaker has the option of “rising and gliding out” (line 6) to look up “in perfect silence at the stars” (line 8), whereas our students are stuck fighting for the window seat and an easier time of daydreaming.

So what is Walt Whitman implying about education through “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”? Well, for one, we need to examine what role the current structure of pedagogy plays in the ways we learn and grow, whether the structure is handed down from governments, used by teachers for “classroom management,” or asked for by students (“How many pages do we have to write?” “Will this be on the test?”). If we openly discuss this desire for order, perhaps students might find the “confidence to

question the extent to which they can resist the power of the classroom's structure" (Gold, 2004, p. 217). In the current educational climate, things in the classroom are so prescribed and regimented that teachers and administrators who take even the smallest steps outside testing guidelines are seen as revolutionaries. An article by Grace Rubenstein in *Edutopia* tells the stories of some of these "Outlaw Educators" (2006). One of these teachers, Camsie Matis of the South Bronx, was inspired by immigration marches in the news and "dropped her original lesson plan to launch a project in which students explored the impact of immigrants in the United States" (p. 39) in her ninth grade math class. She was scheduled to "study how to graph and solve inequalities" (p. 39), and decided to focus on real inequalities instead of the artificial ones in her textbooks. I applaud Mrs. Matis's decision to take the class out of the classroom and bring the outside world in, but this is what passes for an "outlaw" these days? Using real-world, real-time experience to ground abstract study? I suppose Whitman's speaker would also be an "outlaw" today, for wanting to actually see some real stars to go along with the charts he was given about them.

What is needed before our students can truly begin the process of *currere*, before they can begin to think about Pinar's autobiography (1975/1994), is simple in concept but difficult to attain in our current system of tests and accountability: open doors. Opportunities for learning are everywhere available, and much of what students learn is unnoticed by them or discounted by us because it does not happen in lesson plans. For students now, the acts of Pinar's regression and progression might sound like "I've been in ninth grade and I'm going to tenth grade," leaving out much of the life that has brought them to this moment and will take them into tomorrow. We need, as Gold says,

Whitman's "mystical moist night-air," which "signifies an unbounded place" in which "the speaker can 'wander,' can take personal measurements, and can 'from time to time' look up 'in perfect silence at the stars'" (2004, p. 225). Just such a freedom might "reveal an experience of truth and beauty that could never be captured within the confining and limiting structures of the lecture room" (p. 225). Gruenewald also found after thinking back upon his teaching experiences that he needed to get out of the building more, literally and figuratively, that "being trapped inside a classroom is a kind of death" for him and his students (2002, *Lessons learned outside the classroom*, para. 1). What we find when we expand the ideas of "classroom" and "learning" to incorporate all of the life they are supposed to offer us, is that these terms do not really have any limits that are not as artificial as the walls between classrooms and the outdoors they block off from view. We find that there are many voices we need to hear; that, for example, "through weaving the writings of Whitman and Dewey we offer an evolving understanding of how much the joy of the occupation of teaching lies in its ability to reveal wholeness rather than yield to the fragmentation so common in current teaching" (O'Quinn & Garrison, 2006, para. 3).

As public education in the United States stands right now, "there is too little that links children, young people and their teachers with the voices of the past, with the world we inhabit together, or with the possibilities for the future" (Clifford & Friesen, 2003, p. 103). And as Dewey has pointed out, to take pieces of our large, full, complicated world and try to separate them from their context, they have "to undergo some modification in order to shut out some phases too hard to grasp, and to reduce some of the attendant difficulties," and when we do this, those "things which are most significant," especially

in science, “drop out” (1902/1964, p. 354). At this point, “understanding starts to become incomprehensible because it no longer occurs within a large, patterned, disciplined space of relations and possibilities” (Friesen, Clifford, & Jardine, 2003, p. 115). We are left with charts and diagrams and formulas that look less and less like Whitman’s stars all the time. Yet, we insist on our tests that it is the charts and formulas that matter, ignoring the connections, the links, the “mystical moist night-air” that makes them worth studying in the first place.

**“There Was a Child Went Forth”**

*“There was a child went forth every day;  
And the first object he looked upon, that object he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day of a certain part of the day,  
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years”*

(1892/1993)

I would like to begin the next section, about the connections and relationships and context that matter so much to learning, with two stories, one inside the conventional classroom and one outside. The first is about events that occur in my own AP English Literature classroom, with changing details, every year. When I graduated from my own high school, I felt like what I missed most in my public education experience was a sense of how all of the things I had studied, across those six class periods a day, were related; they seemed to all have been developed in a vacuum. But of course, life does not really take place in a vacuum, ever. Thoughts, actions, and events are influenced and sometimes inspired by other thoughts, actions, and events. So, when I teach a new unit of literature, usually broken up by awkward but traditional dates into groupings around wars, kings and queens, or art movements, I make sure to situate that movement or group of works in its time and place, including everything I can think of that might be relevant.

“Try to settle on a single reason for a war to have started,” I might tell them, “and if you’re honest, you’ll see how hard it is to narrow down, to separate from a multitude of important forces swirling around those moments.”

This importance of context and relationships is especially evident in the spring, when I try to explain the difficult theoretical positions and outlooks held by the Modern and Post-Modern art movements of the twentieth century. The conversation usually begins with a student asking something like, “Why are they all so depressed?” When I try to answer, I see that I need to talk more about the two World Wars and their effects on Europe. The more I try to do that, the more I feel like I need to go back to the Victorian Age in Britain, to talk about colonialism, nationalism, and British confidence in general. But the more I get into that, the more I feel like we need to return to the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, and the West’s trust in science, technology, and reason. But to understand why those things are so important, we need to show their relationship with feudalism and the Great Chain of Being. And by then, we might as well return to *Beowulf*—May back to August, in twenty minutes. At some point, a student usually asks some variation of, “Since everything is connected, why isn’t there just one big class called life?” “There is,” I always answer.

The second story is even more autobiographical, about my own learning experience outside the classroom, though its theme is universal. I have always been fairly “academic”; I performed well in school growing up, and did well in college, too. In addition, I played a variety of sports and was at least musically inclined enough to impress girls. I say that simply to explain that I thought, in my late teens, that I was about as well-rounded as a young American male could be. That mistaken confidence



was shaken for me, quite painfully at first, the summer after my sophomore year. In the interest of saving money, I moved to my parents' home in the mountains of north Georgia for the summer, looking for one of those great, lazy summer jobs. However, small towns in the mountains offer limited opportunities for part-time employment, to understate the case, and so I found myself at 6:45 one morning in the office of a local contractor.

Let me say here that I did not think much of construction work. Of course, being an able-bodied young man who knew everything, I did not expect it to be hard—just boring and irritating. After the foreman evaluated my relevant job skills—which I was about to find out were non-existent—he assigned me the highly-regarded position of “manual laborer.” And when I say manual, I mean it in every sense of the word, except the one that suggests there was a book that told you how to do it. My honors thesis on poet and artist William Blake fit nowhere into my duties: carry, shovel, load, unload, hammer, drive to the store. Though I thought that sounded like some easy exercise, the learning would begin almost immediately. Some time during that first week, when the hole we were digging by hand filled up each afternoon with rain, I realized that there is a *technique*, maybe an *art* to shoveling. Later, after hours of embarrassment and sore thumbs, I realized that there is a good way and a bad way to hammer, as well. I will not even go into my difficulties ordering the correct parts at the various hardware stores around Appalachia. Eventually, I went through one of James Joyce's famous “epiphanies,” and what I discovered was that there were a lot of things I knew nothing about, and I was not very good at any of them.

Towards the end of the summer, though, I passed through that stage and into a much better one: I learned to love that work. I learned a new way of speaking and

storytelling. I learned the unexpected joy of bringing buildings out of the ground, of seeing clear evidence of the work I had done all day. I learned to value and even participate in job-site math, which often involved contraptions of weighted and painted and knotted string as reliable as any formulas I had learned in school. I learned to appreciate the beauty of boards well-cut and fitted, of an arm that could drive 100 nails effortlessly and without error. I worked two more summers, until I married and moved, and consider them some of my most important learning experiences. I went to school year-round those three years, and I have ever since.

Whitman also went to school every day of his life, though very little of it was “formal” education, and advocated that we do the same in much of his work. In his “There Was a Child Went Forth” (1892/1993), what follows the four-line stanza that begins this section is a list of over thirty lines, detailing all of the things that form and shape the child who “went forth” and are formed and shaped by him. The list includes the child’s parents and family, of course, but not at the top; they do not appear until roughly half-way through, and are not given much more discussion than any other part of the child’s experience. The descriptions of the mother’s “mild words” and “wholesome odor” (line 23) and the father as “strong” and “self-sufficient” (line 25) do not necessarily paint them as negative influences, however; even the mention of the father’s “blow, the quick loud word” (line 26) is not so much negative as authoritative. The placement of the parents so far down the list rather seems to elevate the importance of the other things on the list, as if it were Whitman’s goal to de-marginalize certain influences, not deny the parents’ place as a primary influence.

The child's "school-mistress" (line 15) makes the list, too—right after the "old drunkard staggering home from the out-house of the tavern" (line 14). Again, this juxtaposition does not seem to denigrate the teacher so much as emphasize the variety of available influences, no matter how positive or negative. This juxtaposing technique is found throughout the poem, carefully linking "blossoms" and "commonest weeds" (line 13), "friendly boys" and "quarrelsome boys" (line 16), "city and country" (line 18), "shadows" and "light" (line 34), and many other pairs. Sometimes the pairs are opposites (living and non-living things), sometimes they differ in species (people and animals), and sometimes they differ in scope, or role in the world (the boat and the waves in lines 35 and 36). The point of such a list is summed up in the last lines: "These became part of the child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day." The boy becomes the world around him, and the world becomes the boy, and if textbooks and tests play a part in his development, they likely just extend the list, not replace it. Whitman actually presents here much the kind of educational complexity William E. Doll, Jr. (2005) describes: "child and curriculum, learner and teacher, self and text, person and culture dance together to form a complex pattern" (p. 55). The child's world is one full of iterative *feedback* loops of the type described by Benoit Mandelbrot (1983), in which the output of the child's "going forth" each day serves as the input for the next day, and in which the world and the boy are little bit different each time for the experience.

It seems, too, that Whitman is not alone in his view of the largeness, the fullness of educational experience:

If we have learned anything in the past 50 years we most certainly must now know that the school is not the center of a child's learning, but merely one of his environmental situations which he experiences in the context of his own unique historical, biological, and total environmental fabric. (Macdonald, 1971/1995, p. 52)

David W. Jardine and Pam Rinehart (2003) remind us, too, that what is learned at school is not more important than what is learned elsewhere, pointing out that "a child's existence is valid without notebooks; notebooks are the noting of moments of a life that is valid already" (p. 76). In fact, even resistance should be considered in a more whole definition of education, including "not learning, ignorance, aggression, and even phantasies" (Britzman, 2003, p. 8). What we must do, according to Dewey (1902/1964), is "get rid of the prejudicial notion that there is some gap" (p. 344) between what is learned inside and outside the classroom. As he says, we should stop thinking of either kind of knowledge as fixed, and start to "see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital" (p. 344). When it comes to learning, the "only significant method is the method of the mind as it reaches out and assimilates" (p. 344). The content, wherever it comes from, "is but spiritual food, possible nutritive material" (p. 343). Of course, to follow such advice is to allow a much greater degree of subjectivity and democracy in our classrooms than is currently supported.

However, to treat curriculum this way might not be nearly as dangerous as it sounds. We have for too long pretended that "a central repository of knowledge called school will be the place where all or most learning takes place" (Nair, 2006, p. 28). In addition, we hold tight to the keys to this "repository," afraid that to open the doors might

mean that no one will come back. But what is it, really, that we are such experts on? What is the treasure that we hoard? I am older than my students, so I can guide them through my experience. I know a lot about English literature and language, so I can guide them in that regard. But what about love and relationships? Choosing a career? Finding a place in the world? I have love, a job, and a place, but are we all not just finding our way through these things too? And what is wrong with that? As Mary Ellen Dakin notes, there “are many ways to excellence” (2001, Conclusion, para. 6), or happiness, or success, and my way is but one of them, and closed anyway to anyone who is not me, who has not lived my unique life. We must remember that “we do not fail when our children become something other than what we dream for them” (Conclusion, para. 2). They have their own dreams.

We should re-introduce that important measure of democracy, the one that says “my students are my equals in mind and spirit” (Dakin, *The poet on equality*, para. 5). We should find and listen to more voices, allow for more possibilities, remind ourselves that this is not much of a “land of opportunity” if many of the choices about what kind of people we will become are already made for us. What we need is Macdonald’s “open school” (1964/1995, p. 33), where “learning is seen as the outcome of personal responsiveness to wide varieties of stimulation,” where children “are seen as unities, self-actualizers and creators” (p. 33). Such a school would encourage and guide children to go forth, every day, and become what they will, without pre-conceived notions about where their walks will take them. As Alan A. Block (1997) says, the “walking” journey that is learning “ought to be a process of exploration,” because “to know where you are going would be to deny the activity itself for the distant product of arrival” (p. 84).

Patrick Slattery and Kevin Daigle agree, and say that “students . . . must be allowed to meander, explore, create” (1994, p. 459). Only on an educational journey like this, through a world big and wide with paths open in countless directions, can we come to the method of *currere* (Pinar, 1975/1994)—only, as Whitman might put it, on the Open Road.

### **“Song of Myself”**

Pinar’s method “seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one’s understanding of his or her life (and vice versa)” (2004, p. 36). This method takes as its hypothesis that for a student of *currere* every moment is an autobiographical one, in which “he or she is located in historical time and cultural place, but in a singularly meaningful way, a situation to be expressed in one’s autobiographical voice” (p. 36). However, though it is a “complicated conversation with oneself,” it is not just that; it is always a conversation connected to the rest of the world, an “ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action—as a private-and-public intellectual—with others in the social reconstruction of the public sphere” (p. 37).

The details of Pinar’s method of *currere* are “temporal and conceptual in nature” (1975/1994, p. 19), examining one’s educational life with a “developmental point of view” consisting of four steps: regression, progression, analysis, and synthesis (p. 19). In the first step, regression, one “returns to the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present” (p. 21). This step helps us realize how we came to be where we are in the present, and the clearer and more honest the picture we create, the better our understanding of the present will be: “As the past becomes, the present is revealed” (p.

22). In the second step, one looks the other way, finding that the future is already here in the same way that the past is still here; the future as one sees it, full of goals and fears and dreams, “influences, in complicated ways, the present; it forms the present” (p. 24). In the third step, one takes these “photographs” (p. 25), and uses them to see a clearer picture of the self in the present. Then, one is to examine the past, present, and future, looking for “their complex, multi-dimensional interrelations” (p. 26). Finally, one puts the whole together, synthesizing, discovering one’s “conceptual gestalt,” one’s “point of view” (p. 27).

A student guided through the kind of open education depicted in Whitman’s “There Was a Child Went Forth” and advocated by Macdonald and others would likely find Pinar’s method of *currere* a rich experience indeed, and have a much easier time formulating a clear picture of his or her self than today’s average public education student would. As Macdonald says, the “self is not ‘actualized’ in a vacuum, but in a world” (1964/1995, p. 24). However, there is hope still that school can be a positive part of the developmental process; as Block says, “the school is a space—an object—that can be used for play and creativity” (1997, p. 19). When combined with all of the child’s other learning experiences, school “is an environment that can be used to facilitate the development of the self” (p. 19), not hinder that development. Rather than focus on testing *small* facts and figures as if they were the point of going to school, we could “rescue the specificities of our lives from the burden of everydayness to show how they reverberate within grander schemes of things” (D. G. Smith, 1991/1999, p. 41). If we open up our ideas about what school is, we might be able to use it to make the world big again for our students, to show them that we are part of something large and complex and

dynamic. With openness that allows for space for *currere* and autobiography, we might be able to explore the world instead of the plastic globe in the corner.

There is perhaps no work of literature that embodies these ideas of openness, largeness, and self-development, that seeks connections with a real world and understands the importance of autobiography, as well as Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1892/1993). It is a sprawling, exploratory manifesto on life-long learning, numbering 52 sections of varying lengths and subjects, united only by Whitman's experience of them. In the song's lines, Whitman ponders, remembers, wonders, appreciates, decries, hopes, fears—he regresses, progresses, analyzes, and synthesizes. For this reason, it is fittingly the "centerpiece" of Whitman's life-long work *Leaves of Grass* and the best picture we have of Whitman and the way he looked at the world: "everything, in short, leads to and away from it" (E. H. Miller, 1989, xiii). It is also, as Pinar recommends in the method of *currere*, a work that "celebrates the individual as the center of being and value, with the result that a powerfully autobiographical book can be seen as representative" (Vance, 1996, p. 275). Indeed, Whitman makes this clear in the first lines of the first section, making sure that we understand before he begins that his "Song" is also our song, in the sense that we are part of him and he is a part of us:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Though the whole poem is a discussion of self-formation, education, and discovery, of relationships and connections, of the largeness of the self and of the world ("I am large, I contain multitudes," section 51), the part of the poem that most directly depicts the teacher-pupil mode of learning is section 6. This section begins with a



deceptively simple question, of the sort that children often ask and adults pretend to answer authoritatively: “*What is the grass?*”. Whitman, though, does not play those adult power games by making up a response that will end the discussion about a subject that escapes easy explanation. Instead, he opts for the kind of democracy that he is known and praised for (Dakin, 2001), and confesses his shared wonder at the grass. He first admits “How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he,” and then treats the situation as an opportunity for the kind of “play” that Gold (2004) and many others find so important to curriculum and development. The rest of this section of “*Song of Myself*” is a largely metaphorical list of guesses that take what seems like a small, insignificant part of our world and make it large and profound.

Whitman here does what Block (1997) suggests educators should always do: “make the familiar unfamiliar and the familiar exotic so that experience might lead not only to new perceptions and new emotions but to the production of self in the awareness of these effects” (p. 92). For Whitman, accustomed to the process of accumulation, connection, and self-formation in a big world, the grass can be “the handkerchief of the Lord,” “itself a child,” “a uniform hieroglyphic,” “the beautiful uncut hair of graves,” or any number of other things—possibly all of them at once, just as we are part of many things at once and they are part of us. For Whitman, “All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,” a sharp contrast to the ever-shrinking, fragmenting world we hear so much about.

In this way, Whitman becomes the kind of teacher that uses maps not as we often do in our classrooms—to neatly divide, categorize, and classify something that often frustrates all three efforts—but more in the way Dewey recommended, as “a summary”

that “serves as a guide to future experience” (1902/1964, p. 350). From this perspective, the map is made by one who has gone before, and who now offers guidance to where the traveler would like to go, but only to avoid “waste of energy and loss of time” (p. 350). This kind of map “puts the net product of past experience in the form which makes it most available for the future” (p. 350-351). We must remember as teachers, though, that we are also “engaged in the art of living,” still forming our own selves, still learning, and what is needed is a “willingness to ‘let go’ and to immerse oneself in the process of living with others in a creative and spontaneous manner” (Macdonald, 1974/1995, p. 96). One generation can lead the next through this big, open world of possibilities and connections, offering directions and help along the roads when asked. But it should not choose the road for those learning to walk them; the Road, for them and for us, should be Open. Education is, ultimately, an experience of the individual, of autobiography, a path traveled “toward goals and ends which are the individual’s own” (Macdonald, 1964/1995, p. 24). What we can do for our students in a big world is live, grow, and invite them along, leaving behind as we go a note like the one that closes Whitman’s “Song” in section 52:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

*Chapter 3***“I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”: Pinar, Percy, and the  
Possibility of a *Search***

The world today seems to grow ever more complex, messy, full of ambiguities, contradictions, and confusion; our schools, though, seem to be headed in the opposite direction, interested in eliminating such messiness. However, the messiness comes from the fact that schools are full of messy people, whose lives and loves and limits and liabilities all vary from desk to desk; to ignore the complexity of our world is to ignore much of what makes us who we are. The distance between the world we live in and the world as presented by our schools can be illustrated by a poem from Sharon Olds (1999). Entitled “Take the I Out,” the poem features two voices: one speaking in the title, and the other responding with the rest of the text. In the course of reading “Take the I Out,” we eventually realize that what we are hearing in that title is the kind of thing teachers always tell students; we say “Take yourself out of your work. Work hard, but work on *my* work, make it your work, too, and turn it in the way I want to see it, or else.” This is especially obvious in writing classes, where any teacher can tell you how often students feel compelled to ask, “Can I use ‘I’?”

“Of course not!” our teachers reply, but what students hear and what teachers mean (hopefully) by that are not necessarily the same thing. Any good writing teacher will explain that, as a general rule, inserting phrases like “Well, I think,” or “in my opinion” is a great way to destroy credibility, reducing a carefully constructed, convincing argument to something that can be dismissed with a wave of the hand by

anyone who has ever felt otherwise, confident that it's all just opinions, anyway. At least until students are comfortable enough with the techniques involved in essay writing and careful enough about the points they are trying to make, it is simply easier to tell them to avoid "I" altogether.

But what students hear is often very different; whereas we writing teachers mean "for now," our students often think we mean "forever." What students often hear from teachers' directions to remove the "I" is "Your ideas do not matter, so find someone else's and use those instead—preferably someone *important*." And so they do, because they want to get the almighty numbers on their transcripts that they have been taught—by us, too often—will guarantee life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As Wendy Atwell-Vasey (1998) says, "a hush falls over the school classroom"; students still write often, but in someone else's voice, learning "to leave their words outside, in the hall, on the bus, at home, removing them like muddy boots" (p. 2). But in doing so, they lose themselves, their own voices. They have no idea what a thesis statement is, because they have no idea how to take a position on anything, having let those muscles atrophy for the sake of pleasing the powers that be with safe, sterile, *standardized* writing that does nothing, but "does the trick." *Dot your i's, cross your t's, plug in x, solve for y, do the math, and get an 'A'!*

The problem, of course, is that writing is not simple math, and the more it looks like it, the more it stinks. And besides, even math, especially complex, fractal math, is more dynamic than a lot of essays these days. At least in math the goal is to unlock the secrets of the natural universe, or at least win at pool. What does a formulaic essay, short story, or novel inspire? Boredom. And hatred of writing class, by both students and

teachers. We have given instructions that we thought would clarify the writing process, but in doing so have actually managed to make writing worse and worse all the time.

And surely this is not what we all get up in the morning for—is it? Assigning students to write formulaic things they do not like to write and we do not like to read? We get an education so that we can have the lives we want, to the best of our abilities to achieve them, and hopefully be happy and satisfied doing so—and we become teachers to help others do so. But how can they do that if they don't know what they want? How can they know what they want, if they don't know who they are? How can they know who they are, if no one ever lets them figure that out? Where's the "I"?

Olds (1999), for one, has her speaker refuse to give up the "I." The speaker answers in the first line like many of our students do inside, "But I love the I," and then proceeds to tell us all of the wonderful reasons why—the connections to her family and heritage, her sense of personal identity, the foundational building blocks of who she will become. And we grow to love the "I," too, as teachers and as curriculum theorists, once we are convinced we are allowed to embrace the messy collections of things that make us who we are. Pinar (2004) says that the classroom, and everything else we hear and say and experience, is part of one big "complicated conversation" in which "school texts are also pretexts to conversations whose character and destination cannot be known in advance, whose value cannot be reduced to student performance on standardized examinations" (p. 62). According to him, our education is a personal, subjective, exploratory curricular adventure in which we try to speak when we should and listen when we should, contributing our own voice and all of the life we infuse it with to the incalculable and unpredictable variety of voices in the world's great discussion of

everything that matters—including talks about what matters. And to be heard and understood, we need to develop our voices; we need to find ourselves a place from which to speak. Our students, and our teachers, need to figure out who they are and what they want so that they can truly join the discussion, and if we want to develop an atmosphere in which this kind of voice development might take place in our schools, we need to, in the terms Olds (1999) uses, put the “I” back in the curriculum—especially, and maybe initially, in writing and literature classes. And we need to give our students room to learn, both about themselves and about everything else; we need to “let them learn” more than we “teach them.”

However, this won’t be easy these days. As Gail M. Boldt, Paula M. Salvio, and Peter Maas Taubman (2006) put it, contemporary public education is characterized by “a depersonalized empiricism” that chooses its tests, standards, and measurable results “to the exclusion of all other considerations,” and leaves little room for “subjectivities, idiosyncrasies, creativities, and emotions” (p. 3). And even when we are not using prison language like “lock down” to describe procedures at our schools, we are locking down the curricular experience and teaching methods through pervasive “government pressure for what is known as ‘evidence-based research’” in which the “researcher is required to demonstrate, before it can be carried out, the value of the research” (Britzman, 2006a, p. ix). Under these circumstances, “unruly subjectivity becomes an improper study” (p. ix), which not only severely hampers anything arts-related, like poetry, but also creates an atmosphere in which students—and teachers—learn to keep the “I,” their personal ideas and responses, out of all of their studies. In fact, the only reason such subjectivities are given any attention is to figure out how to eliminate them; “students are viewed as test

scores needing to be improved and are scrutinized for any deviant behaviors which may be contributing to the low test score” (Roseboro, 2008, p. 57).

To begin to rectify this situation, Donyell L. Roseboro (2008) argues for much greater attention to writing and literature, and finds support in her work on Lacan, pointing out that “to know one’s self is to recognize one’s mobility in language” (p. 8). In fact, it seems that for Lacan, literature and writing skills are absolutely vital for understanding both ourselves and others, since “because the subject’s ‘being’ depends on the subject’s spoken words and understanding of others, s/he exists as a perpetually interpreted being” (p. 25). In studying literature and writing, then, we can see the possibilities for the expression and understanding of ourselves, our “I”: even though writing “can never quite accurately capture the full meaning of discourse” because of its symbolic nature, “what makes writing so tantalizing . . . is the possibility to give it different readings, to suggest different meanings of the signifiers” (p. 37). If, according to Lacan, “the ‘I’ . . . exists in/through language” (p. 63), then we must learn to write ourselves. To write well, we must have something to say. To have something to say, we must have a clear, strong voice. To have such a voice, we must have self-knowledge. To have self-knowledge, we must look within, to every hidden corner of who we are, and were, and want to be. We must remember that just as we cannot write ourselves with someone else’s ideas and beliefs, we also cannot pretend that we come into our literature and writing classes as blank slates; this is just as true of researchers and teachers as it is of students. We do not write ourselves, or teach, from scratch, but rather *revise* the person we are when we enter the building. When we learn to see that person clearly

through the work of *revision*, when we learn to recognize and develop our own voices as teachers and students, then good writing, good teaching—and life—can begin.

\* \* \*

*“I believe in the Kingdom Come  
Then all the colours will bleed into one  
But yes I’m still running . . .  
You know I believe it  
But I still haven’t found  
What I’m looking for”*

(U2, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,” 1987)

I am an American. I am a Christian. I am David Patrick Owen, Jr., a thirty-three-year-old man who needs to go on a search for the soul, the identity, of his country and his vocation and his faith and himself. I must admit that all four are sunk in what Walker Percy calls “everydayness,” a kind of unthinking, unaware haze that gives us nothing but the ignorance of our own despair. And as Percy reminds us by quoting Kierkegaard in the front of his novel *The Moviegoer* (1961/1998), “the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair.” It seems that we are all—America, Christianity, and me—trucking along in an empty race with no prize other than the end of the day, or the year, or maybe even the calendar. And we have brought this empty race into our schools.

Along the way, we are also far more often characterized by hate and fear and condescension than by the love and grace that are supposed to be our foundations. And we are too often unwilling to acknowledge this; we close our eyes to what we ought to see, drown out the voices to which we should listen, and wall off our hearts to what we ought to feel. We claim to have all the answers, though we often refuse to even ask the questions, pressing ever outward while what is inward grows more and more sick. We



have forgotten what James B. Macdonald taught us in “An Image of Man” (1964/1995), that openness, not tunnel vision, is the key to reaching our personal, spiritual, and national goals: “to be open to life is the maximal condition for developing human potential” (p. 20). But I am an American. I am a Christian. I am a teacher. I am David Patrick Owen, Jr., and I say I, we, need to change our course; we need to *revise*, we need to look, and listen, and feel what it is that we are, and determine what we want to be. I want to believe in my country, and my church, and myself, and my job, but I have work to do—we have work to do. We need to search for what life can be, for what we want it to be, and be open to what we find. We need to *search*.

\*       \*       \*

Irish band U2 wrote their 1987 album *The Joshua Tree* inspired by their extensive experience touring in America, and their love affair with what they found, or at least what America can mean at its best. The album is certainly no simple love letter to the United States, however; images like “bullets” and “blood” play just as prominently as “Liberty” and “hope,” and for every soaring, uplifting chorus or goosebump-inducing guitar line, there is a matching vocal growl or stabbing, abrasive squeal from the instruments. Sometimes the drums and bass are propulsive, and sometimes they are ominous. Also, while *The Joshua Tree* is—like America—personal, spiritual, and idealistic, it is just as frustrated in all three aspects. In short, whether the album’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” is directly related to America or not, it works perfectly as an expression of what so many people have seen when they look at this country. We have done and tried much, but there is still much to do and try; we, too, still haven’t found what we’re looking for.

William F. Pinar apparently has not, either, even if he is primarily concerned with the field of curriculum studies in *Intellectual Advancement Through Disciplinarity: Verticality and Horizontality in Curriculum Studies* (2007). According to Pinar, we in education today have given in to a kind of “presentism” in which we ignore those who have come before us, who have spoken in the “already-existing conversation” (p. xi) in which we are now speaking. And not only do we too often ignore our curricular forefathers and mothers, as well as our own past in education, but we also “treat our contemporaries not much better,” because we are buried in the day-to-day grind of “‘classroom’ issues” (p. xi). The problem with this, though, is that “linking lived experience to scholarship is exactly the academic enterprise,” and without the “labor of comprehension, critique, and reconceptualization,” we will scarcely be able to “contribute to the field’s intellectual advancement and to [our] own” (p. xii).

Pinar’s recommendation for how to remedy this situation is what he calls an attention to “verticality” and “horizontality” (p. xiii). By *verticality* he means the “intellectual history of the discipline” (p. xiii), which “documents the ideas that constitute curriculum studies” (p. xiv). By *horizontality* he means “analyses of present circumstances” (p. xiv). We need to look both into our past and at the world around us in the present in order to better know who we are, how we got that way, and what we want to do next. Though Pinar reminds us that we “are participating in a conversation larger, more complex, and finally elusive than any single individual or school of thought can grasp” (p. xiv), it is a conversation we must have, and must continue to have.

Pinar is not only right about the field of curriculum studies, but he is also really onto something that resonates nearly everywhere we turn. U2 tapped into the same

current on *The Joshua Tree*, looking into the personal, spiritual, and political past and also at the world they saw around them, and realizing that they still needed to keep looking for the life we have all promised ourselves. Walker Percy, almost uncannily, said some very similar things in his National Book Award-winning 1961 novel *The Moviegoer*. Percy's protagonist, Binx Bolling, is a man who cannot quite find his place in the world. He is reasonably smart, likable, wealthy, and good-looking, and he is also a general disappointment to all of those close to him, though none of them is sure exactly what he ought to be doing with his life. He is both unsatisfied and all too satisfied with it; for example, he is a "stock and bond broker" (p. 9) who is very good at his job and yet cares very little for it. In fact, he often paradoxically gets lost in the very "everydayness" (p. 13) that he despises, that means of living in which we simply *go along* with our days, oblivious to most everything about them, stuck in that hollow routine of mindless work, mindless small talk, mindless television and then sleep, which also sounds a lot like Pinar's description of the current state of public education and curriculum studies. Come to think of it, Percy's *everydayness* sounds like the current state of a lot of things. This is really no surprise, however; at their roots, curriculum questions are questions about who we are, and who we want to be, in the biggest picture we can draw. Not only does it make sense that the world inside education often parallels the world outside of it, but perhaps we should also start our curricular inquiries sometimes with the people we are outside the classroom, in order to better decide what we should bring into it. If we can do this, perhaps we will be able to help our students do it, too.

And that is where the "possibility of a search" (p. 10) comes in; as Binx says, "the search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his

own life” (p. 13)—to find something else, something more, to see familiar things in a new way, to understand truth, and maybe to find God in the process, whatever that means to the person on the search. In short, though his terminology is different, Binx says we need a kind of personal and spiritual *revision*. In addition, U2 urges us onto it, and so does Pinar, and they both realize that the stakes are high. Binx’s life is a perfect example, and he knows it: “to become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair” (p. 13). This passage echoes Aldous Huxley’s assertion that “most men and women lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so monotonous, poor and limited that the urge to escape, the longing to transcend themselves if only for a few moments, is and has always been one of the principal appetites of the soul” (1954, p. 62). For example, Binx goes to the movies to stave off the *everydayness*, just like a lot of us do, both literally and figuratively. But The Movies are only a temporary relief and will not hold off despair forever, and besides, even Binx knows that they too often “screw it up,” having a hero off on the *search* who nevertheless eventually “settles down with a vengeance,” and “in two weeks time” is so “sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead” (p. 13).

And so, Binx says, if we want to overcome the *everydayness*, the despair of our own existence, then we must go on a *search*, we must *revise*; we must go on it ourselves, and with open eyes, and an honest heart, and we must not ever settle down “with a vengeance” lest we slip again into despair. We must keep in mind, though, that the *search* has no set path or direction; there is no “five-step plan” for a trip into the mystical and spiritual realms, or a journey into the true heart of things. There is no easy, clear cut way to understand the concepts and emotions we find most important but cannot

quantify, like love or country or faith or self. Luckily, we do not just have to take Binx's word for what a *search* is like, since Percy gives us some guidance we can use in our own lives through Binx's mostly interior-monologue descriptions of aspects of the *search* that are scattered throughout the novel. And we should not be put off by Binx's own struggles with the *search*. Rather than dismiss these ideas as the well-intentioned slacker dreams of a man who is like the friend we all have, always just on the cusp of getting his life together, we should look at them the way we look at our Declaration of Independence; things like "liberty," "equality," and "self-evident" truths might be wonderful, if we ever actually tried them. But trying them, it turns out, is hard.

Besides, Binx even has a couple of ideas about the *search* that correspond pretty neatly with Pinar's notions of *verticality* and *horizontality* in curriculum studies. As Binx says, during one "vertical search," he "stood outside the universe and sought to understand it" (p. 69); in other words, he took his mind out of its place and time and applied it to all places in all times, much like Pinar does when he listens to all the voices of the "complicated conversation" that have come before him. On the other hand, when Binx goes on a "horizontal search," he reports that "what is important is what I shall find when I leave my room and wander in the neighborhood" (p. 70). In these efforts, he studies the world around him in his particular place and time. On a *vertical search*, he might read intently and then "wander as a diversion"; on a *horizontal search*, he might "wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion" (p. 70). Just as in Pinar's ideas about curriculum, though, both are equally important.

Other aspects of the *search* are also important, and also applicable to curriculum studies both in and out of the classroom, particularly *certification*, *repetition*, *rotation*,

*malaise*, and *wonder*. By *certification* Binx means the curious property of those events and objects that we believe provide “one’s right to exist” (p. 7) as a “person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere” (p. 63), like a driver’s license, for example, or a ticket stub, or a diploma. A *repetition* is the “re-enactment of past experience” (p. 79-80) so that the “time segment” between those events can be isolated and “savored of itself”; we can look at all the life between those two twin events in order to understand it better. A *rotation* is the best we can hope for in life, seemingly, since it is the “experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new” (p. 144), or those blessed moments when we discover the future held more than we thought it might. The *malaise* is the opposite *search* experience, when the *search* is frustrated, and the “world is lost” (p. 120) to us to the extent that we are “no more able to be in the world than Banquo’s ghost.”

*Malaise* often kills a *search*, but the *wonder* can start it anew. The *wonder*, which we are often distracted from, is like the moment when we realize there is in each tiny instant more to the world than we thought, in detail and possibility, and it can come from something as simple as finally seeing what we have looked at countless times. It is like the awe, the wordless appreciation of the beauty of life as it might be, if we just looked hard enough. As Binx puts it, “a man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it” (p. 11). But Binx finally does see it, and it looks both “unfamiliar” and “full of clues” (p. 11). And this is how our world must look to us, too, if we are to have “the possibility of a search,” if we are to *revise*. We must look in familiar places and see things we have not seen if we want to find what we’re looking for.

### *Certification*

One familiar thing we must look at in a fresh way is *certification*. Binx Bolling admits that he loves *certification*, and it is easy to understand why, since it does in some ways give us a “right to exist” (Percy, 1961/1998, p. 7), and can often help relieve *everydayness*. We all have felt, at one time or another, Binx’s joy at obtaining a “receipt” of some kind that recognizes the things we have done, or a “neat styrene card with one’s name on it,” even if few of us would go so far as to exclaim “what satisfaction I take in appearing the first day to get my auto tag and brake sticker!” (p. 7). Even if I do not get so excited about renewing my tag, I have to admit that the very first time I did so was one of the most exciting times of my life. I see hundreds of students every year fall under that same joyous spell when they finally get their driver’s license and spend the next few weeks showing anyone who will look and feign interest. We have also no doubt felt the warm sense of pride of a man who “sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood” (p. 63), and feels, maybe for the first time, like his hometown actually exists in a way it did not before. I have felt this sensation, too, any time my college campus made the broadcast of College Gameday on ESPN, especially if I saw someone I knew or a building where I met for class.

There is something hopeful, and vindicating, about *certification* as Percy describes it. We get diplomas and degrees when we graduate from educational programs as an important and recognizable sign of our growth and accomplishments—we even hang these on the walls of our homes and offices long after they have served most of their usefulness. On a smaller scale, we have grades and test scores and award letters and trophies, which mean so much when we are young that our parents often “publish” them

on the refrigerator or mantle. I personally even go so far as to keep—well-organized, no less—souvenir t-shirts I can no longer wear and ticket stubs of all kinds, for movies and concerts and big sporting events that have mattered to me. We keep all of these things as reminders of important moments or steps in our lives, and hope that their physicality will somehow quantify, *certify* those ineffable aspects of our lives that we worry may otherwise be fleeting and inconsequential. I am surprised, actually, that Binx Bolling was not a photographer, come to think of it.

However, too much *certification* can have plenty of negative consequences as well, and can contribute to *everydayness*, and even *malaise*. Our various forms of *certification*, then, can be good places to begin a *vertical* or *horizontal* search. For example, when grades and test scores are emphasized too much it is easier to recognize how hollow they can be; anyone who wants to can make himself a trophy at the store, print a “certificate” on his computer, or cheat for a grade. Sometimes the “certificate” is a let down, or a reduction of sorts; one of the most disappointing *certification* experiences of my life came during the ceremony for my completion of the Honors Program at the University of Georgia. I invited my parents to the ceremony, dressed up as best I could, climbed the enormous staircase, shook the president’s hand, and received . . . a sheet of thin paper, poorly inked with vague, meaningless, scripted text. In an instant, the ineffable was lost to me; it could not be caught and held this time, and my experience was reduced to the faded and spotty words “High Honors,” and my pride reduced to an uneasy awkwardness.

Countless students have complained of the same sort of *reduction* by colleges and state education departments, who take real, live people and turn them into numbers and



GPA's. "For this?" they ask, looking to me for validation of *all* of them, of their wholeness, rather than the parts of them that can be located on a transcript. We also run the risk sometimes of *certifying* only one thing at the expense of others, of saying too much that *this* is it and *that* is not, and ending up with a certificate or label that does not fit, a signifier that does not correspond to the signified. In politics we have the ever-present American flag, for example, which has been spread so thin among all political parties, car lots, bikinis, etc., that it is hard to tell what it means anymore. But if we go without it, we might be considered "un-American." This kind of co-opting of America to serve specific and narrow and selfish purposes is pretty widespread today; Naomi Klein offers 500 pages of economic examples in *The Shock Doctrine* of our insisting to countries around the world that "Washington Consensus policies were the only recipe for stability, and therefore democracy" (2007, p. 165) despite plenty of evidence otherwise.

We must be careful, too, with religious *certification*; I was baptized, proudly, into Christianity and the Baptist church at ten years old, and could not have been happier about it. However, as the years passed, my church became more and more the kind of place where I could hear "exultant sermons that mingle Christianity, self-help, and right-wing politics" (Goldberg, 2007, p. 53). By the time I heard a minister say from the pulpit that "no Christian in good conscience could vote for the Democratic Party," I knew that I was no longer *certified* by the term "Southern Baptist."

### ***Everydayness and Malaise***

Unfortunately, the kind of experience I had at my church long ago passed into *everydayness*. I am used to a religious climate in which we seem primarily interested in what Eugene H. Peterson calls "domesticating God," and reducing Him to a "size that

conveniently fits our plans and ambitions and tastes” (2003, p. xii). As Peterson further laments, in “every age, religion has served as a convenient cover among an astonishing number of people for cozy self-righteousness and a judgmental rejection of suffering sinners” (p. xiv), but this seems especially common today. When I read Michelle Goldberg’s account of the “domesticating of God” for all kinds of purposes in *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (2007), I am no longer surprised at the way my faith looks to her, since I hardly recognize it as my faith anymore. When I hear about Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson attributing 9/11 to “abortionists,” “feminists,” “gays,” and the “ACLU” (p. 8), or hear that when James Dobson advocates a “Focus on the Family,” he also means encouraging discrimination against homosexuals (p. 15), I cannot understand how we are supposed to share a religion. Despite their claims that “the Bible is absolutely and literally true” (p. 6), and their insistence on making everything about “good and evil” (p. 4), I just disagree. Was Jesus not a master of the parable, and the metaphor? Do these people really think, for example, that he was talking about vines and branches and fruit in the literal sense? And did he not say that the greatest commandment was to love everyone—enemies too? The Bible may indeed be printed in black and white, but its message seems much more complex than that to me.

As writers like Goldberg and Klein and Kevin Phillips (2006) have noticed, politics and religion have become tightly intertwined lately, and that means religion feels increasingly political and politics feels increasingly religious as well. I do not mean, though, that we are suddenly electing ministers to diplomatic posts; I mean that we treat our political positions as if they are a matter of inarguable, irrational faith. Michel Foucault deals with exactly the type of government we see today in *Security, Territory,*

*Population* (2007). Our current political climate is dominated by our obsession with “security,” which Foucault says is dealing with a “series of possible events” (p. 20), and it is easy to see right away what is so dangerous about this obsession. We promise as a government and demand as a people protection from things that *might* happen; we are like the city dweller who says “promise me I’ll never get mugged,” even though we know that no such promise can be kept and that we might *not* get mugged, regardless of what our government does. What the government gives us instead is the *illusion* of security by the only means available to it: “disciplinary normalization” (p. 57). In other words, the government insists that we will be safe if only we will conform to an “optimal model” (p. 57), which in this case consists of complete obedience to leadership, obvious shows of patriotism, and the spending of whatever cash we have available, or credit if we can get it. As Susan Faludi notes in *The Terror Dream* (2007), we were told after 9/11 to effectively “max out our credit cards for the cause” (p. 3). Anything short of this optimal model, we are often told, “helps the terrorists.”

All of this has produced in me a serious *malaise*. I simply have reached a point where I do not understand how my country, and my faith, can say and do the things that I am witness to daily. I have almost accepted that in my government, “the end of sovereignty is circular” (Foucault, 2007, p. 98), that the purpose of their power is to keep it. I have accepted from exhaustion that we may just be in Iraq for oil (Phillips, 2006, p. 26), that we have done so out of a sense of “entitlement” (p. 33), and that other countries like us less all the time for reasons like these (p. 384). I also find myself ignoring the leaders of the faith to which I am supposed to belong—maybe I hope that they will all go away?

I have for some time now just been going through the spiritual and patriotic motions, treading water in a sea of *everydayness* until I drown in the *malaise*. I do not wear the flag pins, Jesus t-shirts, or any of the variety of bumper stickers that are supposed to be *certificates* of my 21<sup>st</sup>-century American citizenship, but I do not fight them much either; rather, I find myself turning off the television, tuning out the preacher, and hoping no one asks me any pointed questions. I also carry some of this *malaise* into work with me, and unfortunately into my classes; I say the pledge, observe the “moment of silence,” prepare students for all of those standardized tests, and discuss scores and statistics and charts ad nauseum, and do all of that without nearly enough critical thought—let alone the voicing of such critical thought. I get up, go to work, daydream through NCLB meetings, and know that the world is lost to me.

### **Disaster and the *Search***

Oddly, perhaps, the first time a *search* occurred to Binx Bolling was a time of disaster. He had just been injured in warfare, and he awoke “under a chindolea bush” (p. 10) to see a beetle scratching around in the leaves. As he says, “there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something” (p. 11). Jolted out of *everydayness* by his injury, he vowed then to pursue the *search* for something more, to *revise*, to see the things he had not seen, and to live according to what he found.

I had a similar experience (war and injury aside) on a sidewalk in New Orleans—coincidentally (?) the setting of Percy’s novel—during Mardi Gras when I was nineteen. Separated pre-cell phones from the only people I knew in the city, broke, and exhausted, I suddenly saw myself in a new light. My life was headed nowhere near where I wanted it to, and I was suddenly worried that if I did not right the course then, I might not ever. I

was not even sure I would find my way home. I did, fortunately, and I sat later that night, reunited with my friends on the banks of the Mississippi, and saw in that dark water and the bright lights around it shades and traces of things I had never noticed before, and promised myself I would not go back from my new, perceptive, purposeful self. Like Binx, though, I made progress but was eventually swept away again by *everydayness*, for which even the mighty Mississippi is no match.

Today, though, we seem to have no shortage of disasters, whether they are personal, national, spiritual, economic, political, military, etc., to shake us; the news, in short, is like an endless tape-loop of disasters which ought to prompt *searches*. But rather than see these as cause for *revision*, rather than question who we are and what kind of world we live in when we encounter a crisis, we seem today to hold ever tighter to the party line—we “stay the course,” even if we do not know much what it is, and we learn just as little from the disasters around us as we do from the ones we have already experienced. We refuse to *revise*, despite disaster. Christian leaders like Falwell, Robertson, and Dobson blame “sin” everywhere they see it, big businesses seemingly always manage to acquire a taxpayer-funded bail-out, and politicians have actually figured out how to profit from these situations.

For example, Phillips claims in *American Theocracy* that our leaders see in Iraq not a war-torn, tyrant-plagued, long-oppressed nation needing help, but instead “the prize piece needed to complete three interrelated Washington jigsaw puzzles: the rebuilding of Anglo-American oil-company reserves, transformation of Iraq into an oil-protectorate-cum-military base, and reinforcement of the global hegemony of the U. S. dollar” (2006, p. 76). Klein has even found a name for this approach we have to crisis, calling her

depressing detailing of these kinds of events in our history *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007). The personalities and characterizations of our political and religious leaders in the public eye do change during these times, but not in good ways; rather than become the honest, humble, serious men and women we need, they often become ridiculous caricatures. For example, Faludi says that after 9/11, the disaster that shook America like no other has, Washington began to look and sound like a “Wild West stage set” (p. 5), and notes that the more “cartoonish” (p. 47) President Bush—our most outwardly-religious president in recent memory—acted, the more popular he became. And for all our talk about the schools and students in “crisis,” we have really done little more in the face of that crisis than help the testing industry make more money.

And this is where I get off. This is *my* disaster, this turning of America, and Christianity—and education—from something hopeful and beautiful into something ridiculous, greedy, macho, self-righteous, and disgusting. My country is not a “theocracy” (Phillips, 2006, p. 208), and I will not make money or support my leaders in their attempts to make money from the misery and suffering of others. I will search for an America, and a Christianity, and a public education, and a David Owen that can be something more than that.

### ***Repetition***

One of the great blessings and powerful tools of the *search*, especially the *vertical search*, is *repetition*, and I am perhaps blessed more than most in this regard. I love the *repetition* of my job as a teacher. I am certainly not talking about the third or fourth time that I repeat instructions to inattentive students, or the lesson I am teaching in the course of the day, though those instances can also offer valuable insights; rather, I am talking

about the way my job *begins* and *ends* each year. I do not have to simply toil on into retirement at the same desk every day. Instead, I get numerous chances to *revise*, to reflect on what I do and why I do it. For example, every time I explain to my writing classes the beauty and freedom of expression offered by poetry, I am able to extract the segment of time since I taught the same thing last year, and measure the world I find between those moments. I see how I have grown, and changed, and learned, and while I am certainly able to improve the way I teach poetry each time, I am equally reminded why it matters so much. My teaching of poetry, as one example among many, becomes the iterative site of one of Benoit Mandelbrot's (1983) *feedback* loops, through which my teaching, and living, undergo *revision*. It is literally a "refreshing" experience, and renews my passion for my work. And every time I see an old student, and think about what we have both become since I saw him or her last, I know why my job is worth the kind of careful attention *repetition* can prompt.

In my spiritual life, *repetition* most often occurs when I encounter songs that carry nostalgic weight, or passages from the Bible in sermons that are also attached to some other point in my life. Like I often tell my students in the case of good poetry, hymns and Bible verses mean something a little different each time we hear them, which is why they are so often repeated and read and sung. The words and songs are nourishment for my life, and my life has changed, and so the words and songs need to be revisited, *revised*, and I need to be reminded of them from a new vantage point. This means *repetition* is not a force for stasis, but rather a way to measure and facilitate change. For example, I recently regained contact with my best friend, a fellow Christian from high school, and had a profound *repetition* experience. In composing the letter I wrote him, I

had to take serious stock of the man I have become as I decided what to say about myself, and about the direction of my life since I had seen him last. No official “revival” experience at church could have made more of an impact.

Unfortunately, though, our national leaders in politics and religion—and education—too often pretend like history has been abolished, or at least has been given a good whitewashing, and so are deprived of the *repetition* experience. Our national Christian voices are often talking about America’s Christian roots, ignoring, apparently, the slavery that propped up our economy, the theft of the Native Americans’ land, or (more positively) the promise of our founding fathers to protect, as Thomas Jefferson says, “the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mohammedan, the Hindoo and Infidel of every denomination” (Goldberg, 2007, p. 32). And how many of them know that there are currently more Muslims in America than Presbyterians or Episcopalians (Phillips, 2006, p. 105)? As for America and its general greatness and power today, we seem to be insistent that we will be the first country to sail off into eternity with no loss of power or wealth or prestige, only moving forever outward and onward with no end in sight and regardless of what we do or how we treat other nations—as Klein’s book painfully describes at length. We too easily forget that “few contemplate Madrid, the Dutch Atlas has put down his lonely burden, and the sun has set on the British Empire” (Phillips, 2006, p. 299); in other words, we are not the first “superpower”—some would say empire—the world has seen, and it is folly to think that we will be the last. It is worth noting here that we are, ironically, *built* to have the kind of *repetition* experiences we refuse: just as our school years begin and end, so do the terms of our leaders. We elect



our officials every few years, and could conceivably make dramatic changes and *revisions* if we wanted to. We just do not want to.

### ***Rotation***

All is certainly not hopeless, though. We could, in fact, begin to *search* for our soul as a nation and as a faith (and as teachers), and we could start to seek both *vertically* into our past and *horizontally* into our surrounding present for the things we so far have not seen. And sometimes, too, we are lucky enough to get what we do not even quite deserve, if we merely put ourselves a few steps down the right path. Percy calls this a *rotation*, an experience beyond what is expected, and Binx Bolling can hardly contain himself when one occurs; as he puts it on one occasion, “my heart sings like Octavian and there is great happiness between me and Lonnie and this noble girl and they both know it and have the sense to say nothing” (p. 144). I have felt this way in a number of instances, even in our time of soul-crisis. As dark as things look for our current education system, I have found to my surprise that there is still curriculum studies, which is to me like “the *Search* as an Academic Discipline.” Also, in high school I was once assigned at random, in a class I hated, a research project on William Blake. What I found set me on fire intellectually, so much so that I not only majored in English later (and teach it now), but I also focused on Blake and the Romantic poets for an MA degree. And as for *rotations* within Christianity, in college I got the chance to serve as the Music Minister (band leader) one year for an alternate service of a Methodist church. I was a Baptist playing spiritual rock music (the real kind U2 might like, not the watered-down, cliché-ridden “Christian” kind) in a Methodist service with a female preacher for which our t-shirts read “love god. love others. nothing else matters.” Every Sunday was

inspirational, but it was also the most fun I'd ever had in church (I hardly knew that was allowed).

My greatest spiritual *rotation*, though, was a trip to Monterrey, Mexico. We were a group of twenty-something students going to help a small, poor community build a church. However, I was blessed, and humbled, and educated by my work for those people in such a way that I cannot imagine that my contributions to their community balanced things out. I saw happy, loving, hard-working people, who had far less than me to be happy about, love, or work hard for. I did not know what the Christian faith could really mean until that experience, which came as a shock to someone who had been raised in the church since his infancy. There are apparently still things to discover about a faith thousands of years old, even for an American.

The same sort of thing could be said for my experience in teaching. I had a pretty negative view of public education after my own high school experience, and I certainly never planned to teach. I took my current job really as something I just thought I would try, until I figured out what else to do. However, little did I know that every now and then I would find, especially in my AP Literature classes, everything that America can be. For one, my class is as “multicultural” as any public school course I can imagine; most years, I have numerous nationalities represented—first and second generation Americans—as well as most major world religions. Last year, not only did I have Muslims, but I had Shiites and Sunnis. Everything we discuss, every work we read, every idea we put forth can be examined from a variety of viewpoints, many of them held by people actually sitting in the room. I have found little else that felt so American, at least as the founders promised. It is not surprising to me, based on what I have been

taught about the idea of America, that the United Nations meets here. I feel sometimes like it meets in my classroom.

There are signs of hope, even if we have to *search* for them, or *revise* the way we look at familiar things in order to see how they are hopeful. As depressing as the books by people like Faludi, Phillips, Klein, and Goldberg are, at least they exist. At least there are people who notice what is wrong with the directions we are headed as a faith and as a nation, and who speak out about the trouble they see around us and up ahead because they know we can still change course.

\* \* \*

In the work of William Blake I found a million ideas, and phrases, and verses that troubled, and confused, and intrigued, and inspired me. Perhaps, though, nothing I found in those years of study affected me as profoundly as the first four lines of a work called “Auguries of Innocence”:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour (1988, p. 490)

What a way of looking at our days—like the *search* as a way of life, continued eternally, continually *revised*. To Blake the world must have seemed inexhaustible, enough “clues” in every tiny corner of our lives to keep us occupied forever. And, simultaneously, it seems that to him there is still time to do it all, to pause and reflect, to wander, to keep things too long, to wait, to “Hold Infinity” in the palms of our hands, and experience “Eternity in an hour.”

Ultimately, I cannot send America, or Christianity, or our education system, on a *search* for its soul. And I cannot decide for any of them what it is supposed to be. I do

not have any secret knowledge, or any magic bullets to stop war, or perfect the economy, or rid us of greed or hate, or explain with complete authority exactly what the Bible says we should do. But I can start the *search* for those things with me, pledge my life and my efforts now to try “to see World in a Grain of Sand,” to be as “open to life” as James B. Macdonald (1964/1995, p. 20) says I should, to never stop looking for all of the things I have not seen before, both near and far. And I can do so with an open mind and heart, and with honesty and integrity and responsibility. I can *search, horizontally* and *vertically* like Pinar and Percy say I should, mining my past and my present and aiming to become a man of my time and of all times. I can try to be like the Biblical David, my namesake, of whom poet Robert Pinsky says “in his faults and attainments, his losses and victories, embodies on a scale almost beyond imagining the action of *living a life*” (2005, p. 178). In many ways, David’s story is the story of all of us, because it involves “the mysteries of how a person belongs or does not belong with another, or with a family or a tribe or a people” (p. 9). And mysterious this life is; in fact, as Huston Smith notes in *Why Religion Matters* (2001), “every day we discover anew that the world is more strange, more complicated, and more mysterious than we had suspected” (p. 185). The same could easily be said of America, or Christianity, or our classroom experiences.

And so what I, what we, must do is *search*, seek, question, reconsider, *repeat*, *rotate*, and never stop. And this is what we must help our students learn to do as well. I believe that America, and Christianity, and I can all try to live beautiful, empowering, benevolent lives in the world; we are a country founded on possibilities, and a faith that aims for loving perfection of the heart and mind, and it is a betrayal of both to fail to hope and to work towards those ends—not to fall short, and not to admit that we have fallen

short, but to quit the *search*, to stop trying to find new and better ways to live. Foucault said of government that it is “the continuous act of creation of the republic” (2007, p. 259), and it is certainly easy to see how the framers of our country had the same thing in mind. But what will we create next? What will we make of all that we have been, and all that we want to be, and that we can be? What might America be, with *revision*? I do not know either, but I hope Blake was right; I hope there is still time to find out. And I hope that I will never again succumb to *everydayness*; I hope that “not for five minutes will I be distracted from the wonder” of all that is and can be (Percy, 1961/1998, p.42).

*Chapter 4***Asking Big Questions in Small Spaces: Ethics, Literature, and the  
Classroom**

*“In ethics class so many years ago  
our teacher asked this question every fall:  
if there were a fire in a museum  
which would you save, a Rembrandt painting  
or an old woman who hadn’t many  
years left anyhow?”*

(Pastan, “Ethics,” 1981)

In every class in every school in every country, no matter the subject or conditions, there is one thing that will be true of curriculum across the globe: some things will be taught, and others will not. There is not time, or resources, or teacher expertise to teach everything a child might want or need to learn. Knowing this from the start, we in education have spent centuries trying to cut up the world into prioritized chunks for our students, labeling those chunks “required courses,” “electives,” “club activities,” and, well, “everything else,” which students will have to learn somewhere other than school. Even inside the approved chunks of matter for study, decisions must be made, and some aspects of the chunks sacrificed in favor of other, “more important” ones. These curriculum decisions have caused no small amount of debate and sometimes heated discussion over the years, for the obvious reason that these are difficult decisions about what matters matter most in a world far too big for a classroom.

However, the debates lately have seemed to slow, or even stop in some arenas, as people increasingly look for simple answers to small questions, perhaps in reaction to a

world that only seems to get more complicated—and our recent push for standardization and high-stakes testing in public schools is the latest evidence of this trend. Nearly gone from American public education curriculum today are big questions, hard thinking, multiple perspectives, and complex responses; current public education is largely an experience of concrete curricular guides, regimented pacing and scheduling, and tiny bubbling sheets full of “measurable data” that assume, or at least insist, that there is only one kind of teacher, and student, and education. We do this even though it has been found time and again that “the most difficult problems simply would not yield to quantitative and statistical methods”; we seem to have forgotten, or at least ignored, that “statistical data do not interpret themselves” (Pagano, 1981/1999, p. 89), and that those interpretations might vary as widely as our lives and perspectives actually do, despite the school’s insistence otherwise. Henry Giroux (2006) agrees, and laments that “functioning largely as training sites for basic work skills and test preparation, public schools no longer include the discourse of equity and citizenship as central to their purpose and meaning” (pp. 96-97); in other words, the standardization of our public school system has left us quite ill-prepared to understand that people and their lives are not really standardized. bell hooks (1994), as well, reports that she found herself “unprepared” to deal with the actual diversity of her students when she began teaching; she confesses that though she certainly wanted to, she “did not know how to cope effectively with so much ‘difference’,” since she “had never before been compelled to work within a truly diverse setting” and so “lacked the necessary skills” (p. 41).

We have tried our best in contemporary public education not only to ignore the vast diversity of lives in our country, but also to replace a world of multiple choices with

the illusion that is “multiple choice”—with one correct answer, of course, and a number of incorrect ones. We teach our students that there are answers for everything, not questions, all the while praising the “freedom” and “liberty” we have in our country, which has increasingly become “freedom to choose the right answer” in school and out. We have forgotten that “decision without the possibility of choice . . . can be no decision at all” (Trifonas, p. 133), that there can’t be much freedom if one of the choices is correct and unquestionable.

Ignoring these big questions, however, has only made them disappear from sight, not disappear. These questions that defy easy answers, about what it means to lead a good life, or how to properly participate in a community, or what worth we give the life of our fellow man, will be waiting when our students leave our classrooms and standardized tests behind, and the world that asks them will not likely offer a nice bubbling sheet for their responses. If we want our students to be able to “navigate through the turmoil of subjective thought” (Slattery & Daigle, 1994, p. 454), to participate in the complex and nuanced discussions that determine what kind of life we will all live in the future, we need to start now. We need to *revise* our courses by making every course a course in ethics, in big questions and how to deal with them, whatever the title or content. If we are looking for a starting point, though, a way to get us from where we are now to the kinds of discourses we have a responsibility to let flourish, there may be no better place for this kind of curriculum *revision* than literature.

For example, in Linda Pastan’s poem “Ethics” (1981), the speaker recounts a memorable, formative experience from her adolescent education in which she and her classmates were asked to make a difficult choice, and make it again at the beginning of



every year. The posing of this question is meant to work like an iterative equation for the students; the students are to take what they have learned and experienced the year before and see if the question looks different this time around, like an ethical *feedback* loop.

The question is an old one dealing with the respective values of life and art and asking us to examine the complex relationship between them, and it is a discussion Pastan seems to want to continue; ultimately, she gives us life depicted by art (Rembrandt) responded to by life (the speaker) depicted in art (the poem) to be responded to by life (us). Inside the poem, though, the question from the teacher seems oddly devoid of context or warrant and awkwardly stated; it is unclear to a reader of the poem—and maybe to the students in it as well—why these are their only two options, why the person is an old woman, and what caused the fire, not to mention why Rembrandt deserves such lofty consideration above the work of other artists.

If there is more to this “art vs. life” discussion from the speaker’s past, and the teacher does not ask this question apropos of nothing, Pastan gives us no evidence. In fact, though the question is apparently asked “every fall” (line 1), the students’ responses hardly show that such repetition has helped foster interest in the discussion. The students, it seems, are asked to participate in *revision* without knowing how to go about it. As the speaker confesses, “Restless on hard chairs / caring little for pictures or old age / we’d opt one year for life, the next for art / and always half-heartedly” (lines 6-9).

Every now and then, the speaker would picture the old woman with her “grandmother’s face” (line 7), but even then the vision would be “half imagined” (line 9) and largely inconsequential. The speaker even once tried to cleverly dodge the issue, asking “why not let the woman decide herself?” (line 11).

None of the speaker's "answers" to this question will likely surprise anyone who has taught for very long. The "Restless" students on "hard chairs" who participate "half-heartedly" while "caring little" could come from any of our classrooms. But it must be noted that the question was asked in "ethics class" (line 1), and the fact that such a course even existed in her school should count for something, despite the apparent disconnect the students felt in it; at least the question was asked, after all. And the question does stick with the speaker through the years, though she eventually comes to look at it differently. When she goes to a museum as an old woman herself, she says she realizes that "woman / and painting and season are almost one / and all beyond saving by children" (lines 23-25). The issue still seems to matter, but the speaker's answer is nearly as mysterious to the reader of the poem as the question must have been for the students. So why didn't they ever care about the question? And why does she say later that these things are "beyond saving by children" (line 25)?

Perhaps some of the disconnect the students feel can be explained pretty simply; the "hard chairs" (line 6), repetitive treatment, and choice of saving two things no one is interested in would be enough to put out the intellectual fire of most discussions. But Aristotle (1925/1998) offers us a much more comprehensive explanation in his work *The Nicomachean Ethics* for both the disinterested students and the speaker's lack of faith in them as saviors. For one, the discussion the speaker's teacher is trying to start in Pastan's (1981) poem requires a healthy dose of the kind of wisdom that the students do not have, and Aristotle tells us that this is not their fault. As he says, while young people frequently show great abilities in abstract math, for example, "a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found," since such wisdom requires knowledge of certain "particulars,

which become familiar from experience” (p. 148), and that experience comes with advanced age. He says elsewhere that the kind of virtuous men who become wise about “what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general” (p. 142) do so by habit of behaving in a “just” manner (p. 29), and these habits take time.

However, this does not mean that we should simply wait for the young to grow old before they are asked the big questions; Aristotle (1925/1998) might object to the way the question was posed in Pastan’s (1981) poem, but probably not to the fact that it was asked, despite the students’ inability to effectively respond. There are two kinds of virtue for Aristotle, “intellectual” and “moral” (p. 28). The first must be taught, while the second is a result of habit, and both of these must begin in youth, even if the students are too young to fully understand what these virtues will bring them. He warns us that it “makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference” (p. 29). And the way we teach our students to discover what is good, and just, and wise is to have them study the “most authoritative art,” politics, since “the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man” (p. 2). In other words, the politics he speaks of decides what should be studied, who should study it, and how far these studies should go—it sounds a lot like what we call “curriculum studies” these days. Because this science is so far-reaching and all other studies are subject to it, an education in it must also be wide-ranging; as Aristotle puts it, “the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general” (p.3). In short, though the young are not wise and lack the experience to be so, despite their schooling, they must begin young to walk the path that will lead them to such wisdom later.

However, there are a couple of things we must be careful about in leading our students through this type of curriculum. For one, we must be sure not to simply pass along the answers to the big questions—to tell our students whether it is life or art that should be saved, in Pastan’s (1981) example. To do so would be little different than the standardized tests we currently administer nearly everywhere and for everything, which in insisting on one answer and one way of looking at things stifle and script the very thinking we are trying to foster. We must remember, as Nietzsche (1967) implores that we do, that seeing the world involves perspective, and that perspective is different for everyone; our eyes do not all necessarily see the same world. What works or makes sense today may not tomorrow, and even today it may not work or make sense for everyone. As he puts it, “There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing,’” and “the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity,’ be” (p. 119).

We must also be careful about the ways in which we introduce such big, complex, important issues into our classrooms full of young men and women, the very people Aristotle (1925/1998) tells us do not have the ability to effectively deal with them—we must not become the teacher in Pastan’s “Ethics” (1981), asking disconnected questions to students who do not care about them and could not answer them even if they did. What we should do instead is introduce these issues couched in their context and delivered to our students in a much more palatable, manageable form. Rather than creating our own “ethics class” (line 1), perhaps we should make ethics a natural and pervasive part of our current curriculum, taking the next step from *how* things are to *why* they are, and a great way to do this is through literature. For one, literature, like politics,

is a kind of study-of-all-studies, since its subject can be anything. It can also offer us some of the variety of perspectives Nietzsche (1967) tells us are so important, enabling us to step out of our own experiences a little. And perhaps most importantly, literature gives students and teachers a story to connect with while keeping controversial issues at arm's length enough that discussion does not devolve into emotional personal attacks. Because literature paradoxically concerns a world both close to us and far away, and imagined stories about very real ideas, it can give us a chance to bridge the gap between today and tomorrow, the classroom and the outside world; it gives us a chance to safely explore the kinds of issues students will one day need the wisdom to deal with when the "life and death" choices are very real ones. What is more, we do not necessarily need to toss out our texts and buy new ones; we can, through *revision*, use many of the books already commonly found on high school reading lists.

### ***Frankenstein***

*"Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow."*  
(M. Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 31)

One work of literature that offers a rich site for discourse on ethical matters in the sciences is Mary Shelley's 19<sup>th</sup> century novel *Frankenstein* (1831/1994). Its story of the brilliant and gifted, if misguided and obsessed, Victor Frankenstein is a classic tale of science run amok with terrifying results, and the subject matter of Shelley's work, if not the work itself, is so familiar as to be part of our Western pop culture lexicon, its appeal crossing numerous generations. In addition to the nearly countless movies inspired by the novel, the iconic figure of the "Frankenstein monster" has been appropriated and adopted for all kinds of purposes, from offbeat sitcoms like *The Munsters* to grunting,

green cartoon ghouls to loveable breakfast cereal mascots (Frankenberries), and even actors as artistically respected as Robert DeNiro have played him onscreen.

This is not to say, though, that there is no new ground to tread with *Frankenstein*; rather, most students' (and adults', for that matter) experiences with the story are actually experiences with aspects of Shelley's novel so stretched and transformed over the years from their origins in the young author's work as to be almost unrecognizable. In fact, most students who actually read *Frankenstein* are shocked—not so much at the events of the story but that it is not at all what they expected. There are no neck-bolts, no great flashes of lightning and villainous laughter, no villagers with torches, and no Igor in Shelley's work. Instead, there is far more mental drama than horror story in *Frankenstein*, focusing on what happens to a man's life when he completely gives himself over to an obsession, in this case scientific "progress," sacrificing (almost literally) everything else for it.

The book is actually set up as a frame story to warn all those who reach beyond what has so far been accomplished by man, or at least those who do so without carefully considering the ramifications of their discoveries, inventions, and revelations. Walton, an explorer struggling to sail to the North Pole while staving off mutiny and shipwreck, is the character in the novel who serves as our official narrator, writing home to his sister about his plans and how they are changed by encountering a strange, sickly, shell of a man named Victor Frankenstein on the ice alone, and hearing his story. The warning works, and Walton gives in to his crew's pleas to sail back to England, a decision cemented by his own encounter with Victor's scientific progeny.

The story that Victor tells is not really very scientific at all, though it is about science; Mary Shelley was not a scientist herself when she this tale, after all, but rather the eighteen-year-old daughter of famous social thinkers and the wife of a famous poet, Percy Shelley. Her father, William Godwin, even posed a question in one of his works that is much like the question the teacher in Pastan's (1981) poem asks, except we are forced to choose during Godwin's fire between an Archbishop and his chambermaid (Singer, 2002, p. 155). The parts of Shelley's novel one might expect to have specific scientific bearing—such as the methods used to animate dead matter—are even so vague and glossed over that they barely exist in print, which is perhaps why others have taken such imaginative liberties with those sections in their various retellings.

The story is actually more like a series of ethical dilemmas for Victor, and whether he passes or fails those tests largely depends on who is reading the novel. He must decide first “the manner in which [he] should employ” (p. 32) his new knowledge; he never really asks if he *ought* to use it, but readers certainly will. Once his efforts in reanimation are successful (p. 35), he then must decide what to do with the new being (he leaves, horrified). From that moment he is asked again and again to decide what is of more worth: his life, the creature's life, his family and friends' lives, his principles, his scientific progress, or his public and scientific reputation—he can't have them all, it seems. Shelley even takes her father's ethical dilemma one step further by having her character decide not between strangers, but people he loves. Despite his many private cries of helplessness in the events that follow, Victor is easily the most powerful character in the book: some people will live, and others will die, and it is up to Victor to decide who gets what fate. In following his story, we too are asked repeatedly to

consider what it means to be “human,” and what is of most worth when it comes to science and the role it has played and will play in our lives, both directly and indirectly.

At first, students may not see the direct application of *Frankenstein*'s ethical dilemmas to their own lives. After all, scientists today aren't trying to piece together new creatures from foreign body parts. Or are they? What makes the creature in Shelley's novel so hideous and frightening to the other characters is not the science that allows him to exist; it is his patchwork, discolored, gargantuan appearance. But what if the “monster” had instead looked more like his creator? He might then be the kind of scientific breakthrough only really noticed in medical journals and argued about vaguely by politicians and clergymen. For example, we not only accept without even blinking the practice of organ transplants, but we hardly look twice when someone is fitted with *artificial* limbs, even if they are fashioned from metallic composites and hardly resemble the body part they are replacing. These practices are so common today that Eugene Thacker says in “Data Made Flesh” that some are even wondering if we have already become “posthuman,” and see “technological development as inevitable progress” (2003, p. 75). These “extropians” see things like “robotics, nanotech, cryogenics, and neural nets” not only as acceptable developments but also as “modes of enhancing, augmenting, and improving the human condition” (p. 75). And before we dismiss these claims as outlandish and extreme, we must admit that we have been altering our bodies without much question for years, through more obvious means like plastic surgery and less obvious ones like medicine. Thacker shows us that the body treated with medicine or surgery is forever altered, and new technologies are in some ways just new steps down



this same path; new advances in biotechnology will mean that “the body returning to itself is fundamentally different from itself” (p. 89).

Ethical dilemmas caused by current and projected scientific advances abound, and the profound questions about identity, body ownership, personal rights, and the business of medicine may be tough for our “standardized” students to handle, since they will be far harder even than the question posed by the teacher in Pastan’s (1981) poem. Deciding between art and life will seem easy when new science asks us to choose between each other, or between this child and that one. Many of these debates have already begun, and go on without most of us, whether they happen in tight-knit scientific circles, closed-door corporate conference rooms, or divisive and often tainted political rhetoric. The recent controversy over stem cell research is one of the many topics that Americans have found mystifying, infuriating, or both, since these cells offer tremendous potential for medical treatment for a number of conditions but remain taboo since “the most viable source of stem cell lines is human embryos” (Waldby & Mitchell, 2006, p. 61). In addition, these lines can be “immortalized” (p. 77), igniting discussions of things like “cloning” and what constitutes not only living beings but also the identity of those beings.

The ownership of human tissues removed from the body (and the money made from those tissues) has also complicated this research, as seen in the case of John Moore (p. 88), who sought a share of the profits his doctors made from research using his removed spleen. This idea of who should be allowed to make money from parts of the human body has even inspired Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell (2006) to talk of “tissue economies” that involve “hierarchizing the values associated with tissue productivity” (p. 31). So far, it seems, the only people who cannot legally make money

from body parts are the donors, who have gone from giving a “gift” to an organ or blood recipient (p. 25) to giving a “gift” to research and the scientists who perform it and profit from it (p. 70). In the pharmaceutical industry, Kaushik Sunder Rajan (2006) tells us in *Biocapital* that commodification has caused increased interest in “pharmacogenomics” (p. 94), which means that drug corporations can increasingly tell how certain people will respond to certain drugs—which to some sounds like market research. As we move closer and closer to “personalized medicine” (p. 178) through things like genome research and the “DNA chip” (p. 148), we become not only a “patient-in-waiting” for this industry but also a “consumer-in-waiting” (p. 148), perhaps looking to companies less like people in search of health than a market in search of a product. These issues are all much like the merging of *Frankenstein* and contemporary capitalism, and they ask us to reconsider what we mean by things like human “value” (p. 41), “indebtedness” (p. 81), and “raw material” (p. 54).

### *Heart of Darkness*

*“Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place.”*

(Conrad, 1921/1996, p. 50)

Another literary work that gives us a chance to consider the “capitalism-at-what-cost” idea is Joseph Conrad’s (1921/1996) much-read and highly controversial novel *Heart of Darkness*. The plot of this short work is a surprisingly simple and superficially direct quest story, containing far fewer twists and turns than the river on which it is set. I often tell my students (with a smirk) when they ask about the book that “it’s about a guy who goes down a river to get another guy and then comes back.” These students soon figure out the reason for my smirk when they realize that this book is far more important for what it *means* than for what *happens* in it, which is admittedly not much. And as for

what it means, they find that they cannot really be sure, though we rarely run short of things to say about it. We also often change our minds during discussions about the elusive novel, and then change our minds again, and pretty soon it is easy to see why J. Hillis Miller (2001a) says of this work that the “structure of *Heart of Darkness* is a self-perpetuating system of an endlessly deferred promise” (p. 126); every time we think we have it figured out, it slips just out of grasp. Finally, we must admit that we are warned very early from the primary tale-teller himself, Marlow, that his experience was “somber enough too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light” (p. 22).

People have found any number of themes in Conrad’s work: the darkness of man’s soul, wilderness and isolation’s effect on sanity, a psychological spin on the classic epic journey, even issues of “truth” in storytelling. Some have even decided that Conrad himself is a racist, despite the care he takes to distance himself from the text through two narrators, at least one of which (Marlow) doesn’t always seem trustworthy. These critics, like Chinua Achebe (1977), insist that even if we get past the use of derogatory terms toward Africans and the similarities with Conrad’s own life, we must admit that the book positions “Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor” (para. 38). Opponents of this view insist that Conrad does this ironically, as a condemnation of eurocentrism. After looking at a number of positions on this issue, J. H. Miller decides ultimately that Conrad’s work is art that demands response and discussion, not autobiography, and that just like any work of art that deals with difficult ethical issues, “*Heart of Darkness* should be read. It ought to be read. There is an obligation to do so” (2001a, p. 135).

The most common interpretation of this work casts it—to make a *Frankenstein* parallel—as a story of colonialism run amok, this time with the mythical ivory hunter Mr. Kurtz playing our Victor and sacrificing (also literally) everything else in the interests of his pursuits. Kurtz’s work, and now Marlow’s, is to harvest as much ivory as can be acquired out of the “dark heart” of the jungle—presumed to be in Africa—and send it up what sounds like the Congo river in the interests of European trade. However, we soon find out that Kurtz is a capitalistic superman who “sends in as much ivory as all the others put together” (p. 34), and this production in part has made him seem to the other company men to be “a prodigy,” an “emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else” (p. 40). Soon, though, the company tide turns against him, and his “methods” become far more important than his production. When we and Marlow finally encounter Kurtz, we discover that he has set himself up as a god-like figure to the natives of the area, though most of the horrors involved in acting as this sort of figure for them are left to our imagination. One of the few examples we do get is enough—the grisly image of human heads mounted on posts outside Kurtz’s building, most of the faces creepily turned toward the building, not away from it (p. 74). Aside from vague references to mysterious rituals in the night, apparently Kurtz’s crimes are unspeakable, though it is likely fair to say that while the “cannibals” on Marlow’s boat never eat anyone, Kurtz devours an entire region. In that sense, he may indeed be the “emissary” of a colonialism that is cannibalism as a business model, even if his co-workers are too squeamish to travel as far as Kurtz has down the road they all have paved.

The aspects of capitalism that veer towards inhumanity perhaps began with Adam Smith’s (1904/2003) influential work *The Wealth of Nations*, even if we now forget or

ignore that he did emphasize a moral obligation to take care of the most vulnerable members of a community. The text seems to begin innocently enough, extolling the virtues of the “division of labor” (p. 9) and its effects on the efficiency and profitability of production, and also telling us that the bigger the market is, the more divided labor will be, and so will efficiency and profits increase (p. 27). It is easy to agree with him here, so long as we are thinking of things like Ford’s assembly line, or even academic specialization. However, efficiency and profit are things that we must constantly question as well, and not only because they can diminish job satisfaction (in the case of assembly lines, etc.) and increase the divide between wealthy owners and poorer workers; we must also remember that efficiency in other arenas can give us things like machine guns, or gas chambers—even suicide bombers. Of what worth are the profits generated from such things?

Adam Smith (1904/2003) also tells us that our “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” is natural (p. 22), and that this makes every man “in some measure a merchant” (p. 33). Again, though, so long as we are talking about the normal, fair practices of business, in the sense of my-labor-for-your-pay, my-pay-for-your-groceries relationships, there is little space to argue with Smith. But who decides what “one thing” it is natural for us “truck” and “barter”? Is it everything? Smith even admits later, in terms of our colonialism discussion, that

The colony of a civilized nation which takes possession either of a waste country, or of one so thinly inhabited, that the natives easily give place to the new settlers, advances more rapidly to wealth and greatness than any other human society. (p. 715)

There is little more efficient practice in business, after all, than to use “free” land and raw materials, and it is important to note the way new biotech companies echo Smith’s (1904/2003) language in using “waste” materials in the interests of “progress” and profit (see Waldby & Mitchell, 2006, p. 88). At what point, though, do we ask what are the rights of business concerning the welfare of those people not enjoying the profits, or what limits might be placed on what can be bought or sold? These questions are of vital importance for our students not just because they will grow into the Americans who will make our business decisions in the world’s most powerful capitalist economy, but also because of our nation’s colonial roots; the colonists whose progress toward “greatness” Smith most often marvels at are our forefathers.

Students in the United States need to look critically at the mix of religious and economic values in our particular brand of capitalism as well, as Max Weber (1958/2003) does in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, lest we become Kurtz in the concrete jungle, cloaking earthly interests in heavenly robes. Weber writes about the emphasis our ancestors in many Protestant groups placed on working hard, even for capitalistic gain, believing that “the fulfillment of worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way to live acceptably to God” (p. 81). In this line of thinking, “not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God,” and “leisure” begins to look more and more like “waste of time,” which is the “deadliest of sins” (p. 157). Eventually, man is “dominated by the making of money” (p. 53), which is his end and purpose, since he is not supposed to enjoy the fruits of his labor, but do God’s work with them. Though much of the religious aspect of this way of looking at work has diminished over the years, it now seems that what was once done for God is now done for

greed. It is not hard to see how Weber's analysis of our capitalistic system is connected to 80-hour work weeks, two weeks of vacation a year, and the ability—soon requirement—to work at home, too. As Conrad (1921/1996), A. Smith (1904/2003), and M. Weber (1958/2003) all show us, our students need to carefully consider the costs of the capitalistic success they have been raised to desire. We may have become used to our “calling” in the United States to work as hard as we can to make as much as we can, but who or what is doing that “calling”? If we don't help our students ask these kinds of questions, Weber (1958/2003) tells us our fate is dire: “The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so” (p. 181).

### *The Stranger*

*“That's all for today, Monsieur Antichrist”*

(Camus, 1942/1988, p. 71)

Though *Frankenstein* and *Heart of Darkness* are probably better known and more widely read among high school students, Albert Camus's haunting work *The Stranger* (1942/1988) is perhaps the most relevant of the three in our increasingly multicultural, “global” society, since it deals directly with the ideas surrounding who can belong to a community and who cannot. Whatever the theoretical term we use to talk about it—“acceptance,” “tolerance,” and “hospitality” are but a few—the way we feel about and treat “others” is a sort of umbrella issue today, largely determining how we think and act in almost every area of our lives, from our politics to our religion to our entertainment to with whom we spend our time and where we decide to live. Since this issue is such an important one, I assign my seniors this novel for summer reading, and we return to it throughout the year as they ask over and over again, “So why did he shoot that Arab on the beach?”

Camus's "Stranger" is Meursault, who at first glance doesn't seem quite strange, but more like the friend we all know who is "a little odd," or "socially awkward." He doesn't seem to stand out in a crowd, and his job is nothing out of the ordinary—he deals with "freight invoices" (p. 25), doesn't seem very rich or very poor, and doesn't look much for advancement, even turning down a better job in Paris (p. 41). He likes to swim on the weekends, go to the movies, go on dates, and generally gets along with his neighbors. In short, he is not at all a traditional candidate for alienation, exclusion, prolonged isolation, or discrimination based on race, gender, or religion. He seems like the kind of guy who fits so well into a culture that he might be invisible unless one looked very hard for him.

But soon, readers begin to notice that under such surface characteristics, Meursault is indeed not a "normal" citizen, though it is hard to say exactly why. He doesn't cry at his mother's funeral, but not everyone does, and he can't remember her exact age, but not everyone can. He doesn't want the promotion, but defends his choice logically: "I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and I wasn't dissatisfied with mine here at all" (p. 41). And though he is honestly interested in Marie and thinks of her often when she is not around, he also seems indifferent to the ideas of love and marriage (p. 41), but then not everyone believes in love or wants to get married. In summary, what is different about Meursault is that he does not adhere to his society's conventions, pushing aside all of those things we do because "that's the way things are done around here" in favor of the things that simply make him happy, or relieve his discomfort. When he wants to eat, drink, smoke, go out, or swim, he does. And maybe because this attitude stops short of selfishness, since he



does not directly ask anyone to suffer to make him happy or treat others unfairly, people mostly leave him alone about his eccentricities.

All of this changes, of course, and dramatically, when he shoots an Arab man on an Algerian beach one afternoon, an act that defies all attempts at easy explanation. There was a knife fight earlier with a group including the Arab, stemming from a dispute Meursault had been dragged into by his “friend” Raymond. Meursault, though, inexplicably returns to the spot alone later, and with a gun. While he had not participated in the first fight and at no time expresses anger or a real desire to shoot anyone, and had taken the gun mostly to keep Raymond from using it, he nevertheless pulls the trigger—and once the deed is done, he fires four more times. He tells us that he had not meant to fire at all, that he had tensed due to dizziness, the heat, and the situation and accidentally squeezed the trigger, and that the four other shots were meaningless since the man was dead and he had already murdered him. But those other shots are simply unfathomable to the judge, lawyers, jury, and gallery during his trial, and they understand even less that he does not defend his actions, lie, or in any other way try to wriggle free of his punishment. Soon, he is talked about in court not as a man who accidentally killed another man, but as a monster who kills indiscriminately, befriends lowlifes, asks for no forgiveness, refuses to repent of his sins and embrace religion, and not only does not cry at his mother’s funeral, but also goes on a date when he gets home instead of mourning properly. He is found guilty and executed, not so much for his crime as for being the “stranger” people did not know they had in their midst.

In the interests of facilitating ethical discussions, one of the great things about literary works like *The Stranger* that focus on the idea of “others” in our society is that

they are works of art, not biographies or autobiographies; because they are fictional, they can more easily complicate the victimization of the “other” and keep us from reducing our discussions to platitudes like “we need to be nice to those who are different than ourselves.” We are not asked to simply feel sorry for Meursault, like we do when we hear tragic stories of outcasts and oppressed people on the news, and in fact it is often hard to feel sorry for him. This complexification of our relationship with the “other” is something Art Spiegelman’s (1986) *Maus* does especially well also, and with the difficult topic of the Holocaust. As James E. Young (2000) points out, the author’s commixed story of his own father’s tribulations is actually two stories: “the father’s story and Spiegelman’s imaginative record of it” (1986, p. 23). This subjectivity and choice of creative medium for his work can be “destabilizing” (p. 12) for readers and cause us to consider what it might mean to “remain true” (p. 16) to an audience, a story, or the “facts,” especially since Spiegelman does not always cast his Holocaust-survivor father in an ideal light. Young, though, feels that Spiegelman’s complicated place in this history gives it a sort of strength, arguing that “it may be Artie’s unreliability as a son that makes his narrative so reliable” (p. 23).

If works like *The Stranger* (1942/1988) and *Maus* (1986) are “destabilizing” (p. 12) forces when it comes to the place of ethics in our students’ lives, that is not only a good thing, but also much better preparation for the unstable world they will meet when they leave us than any cookie-cutter program for “success” would be. If our students spend years learning that the world will fit into nice little “units,” “graphic organizers,” and “assessments,” what will they do when someone like Peter Singer (2002) tells them that their SUV’s cause “subtle changes” to the climate that “can be detected only by

scientific instruments” but will still “almost certainly kill more people” (p. 1) than the attack on the World Trade Center? Trying to understand that attack is difficult enough on its own; as Derrida tells us in a dialogue with Giovanna Borradori recorded in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003), “what is terrible about ‘September 11,’ what remains ‘infinite’ in this wound, is that we do not *know* what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it” (p. 94)—it is an event that remains “ineffable” (p. 86). And as for the “War on Terror” that was begun in response to that attack, Borradori reminds us that it is not a “chess game,” in that it has “no preset rules,” “no distinction between legal and illegal moves,” and “no identifiable pieces” (p. 2). And how will we know if we have won?

The world our students will inhabit as adults is increasingly becoming “one world,” to use Singer’s (2002) term, in which “the nations of the world move closer together to tackle global issues like trade, climate change, justice, and poverty” (p. ix), and this means that we will all be forced to “think differently about our ethics” (p. 19). The world is perhaps more entangled on more fronts than it has ever been before, and very few of the decisions we make for ourselves will have no effect on “others.” And as for “others,” while we used to often think of them as a minority to be “tolerated” by “us,” living in this “one world” will mean that there will always be more “others,” more people who are not “our own kind” (Singer, 2002, p. 154) than people who are. And since living together in this “one world” will take something more than “tolerance,” Derrida suggests we have an “ethical responsibility” to begin the “deconstruction of falsely neutral and potentially hegemonic ideals” (Borradori, 2003, p. 17). This idea does not lead to the relativism some think it does but towards true “hospitality,” and rather than “curtailing

the demand for universal justice and freedom, deconstruction renews it indefinitely” (p. 17).

If deconstructing our currently held notions of science, identity, economics, politics, community, and hospitality sounds like too much for a standardized generation to handle, it may be. That is why we must start now to help our students become Derrida’s “philosophers,” or “those who, in the future, reflect in a responsible fashion on these questions and demand accountability from those in charge of public discourse” (Borradori, 2003, p. 106); we must start now to help them along the path to the kind of wisdom Aristotle (1925/1998) knew we would need to live a good life, especially as the idea of a “good life” becomes more varied and multiple every day in our interconnected world community. Even if we just start with the literature we already teach, we simply cannot in good conscience continue to lead our students down the curricular path of standardized, willful ignorance when all the world is at stake; as Kant says, “it is absolutely indispensable, for their enlightenment as to the full significance of their vocations, that both kings and sovereign nations . . . should not allow the class of philosophers to disappear” (1795/2005, p. 30).

*Chapter 5***The Story is the South: Literature and the Exploration of Place**

America is a myth. It is not really a land of the free, as Ronald Takaki reminds us in his *A Different Mirror* (1993), but more a land stolen from the natives (chap. 4), built on the backs of slaves (chap. 5), and expanded west through what used to be Mexico on the wagon wheels of condescending, inarguable providential pretense (chap. 7). Now that the west is ours, we seem sometimes to be trying to extend our idea of America around the globe, to “make the world in America’s image as once, in another time, the Romans sought to remake their world” (Norton, 2004, p. 186). But what is the “America” we are spreading? We speak of a “global economy,” which too often means we want people from other countries to make our t-shirts and answer our customer service calls. We strive to foster peace, cooperation, and civil rights throughout the world—often using bombing raids, economic sanctions, and spying on everyone, including us, as muscle to do so. In all of these efforts, we wave the flag of our democracy before other nations, though we know two of our last three presidential elections ended in embarrassing voting confusions and misdeeds, a huge portion of our citizens do not vote anyway, and our “choices” for leadership are sometimes two guys from the same fraternity.

America, though, is not necessarily a “myth” in the sense of a well-told, far-reaching lie, even if lies certainly are told on occasion. It is rather a myth in the sense of a story we tell to explain things we cannot explain and do not see before us, a way of tying together ideas and people that do not seem to fit naturally, or at least easily. It is a

vision, a dream to strive for, something always just around the corner and currently out of reach, “something evermore about to be,” to borrow a line from William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1850/1996, Book Sixth, line 609). America never has really existed, and does not now, and maybe that is its nature; maybe America is only a dream of the sort that Martin Luther King, Jr., and all of those utopian romantics from centuries ago had: a challenge, something set before us, an ideal for which we dare to aim.

What kind of dream is the American Dream, though, and what kind will it be in the future? Takaki (1993) says that the portrait composed of our racial, geographical, and cultural pieces is “rich and complex” (p. 6), and we need a “fresh angle” (p. 7) in order to study that portrait. He also reminds us that “Americans have been constantly redefining their national identity from the moment of first contact on the Virginia shore” (p. 7), and argues that we need to continue to do so critically and responsibly. David A. Gruenewald (2003) argues that teachers bear much responsibility for this “redefining,” this *revision* of America, and proposes a “critical pedagogy of place” which calls for educators “to reflect on the relationship between the kind of education they pursue and the kind of places we inhabit and leave behind for future generations” (p. 3). According to Gruenewald, students can learn about themselves by learning about their geographical and cultural place, and vice versa: “reflecting on one’s situation corresponds to reflecting on the space(s) one inhabits; acting on one’s situation corresponds to changing one’s relationship to a place” (p. 4). Joe Kincheloe, William F. Pinar, and Patrick Slattery agree, arguing that “just as meaning cannot be separated from context,” so does “the process of understanding curriculum occur within the context of place” (1994, p. 408). Unfortunately, this kind of reflection on and study of place is largely excluded from

today's public education curriculum, since we often seek instead to "standardize the experience of students from diverse geographical and cultural places" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 7). Gruenewald insists, though, that both students and teachers need to "actually experience and interrogate the places outside of school" (p. 9); we need to "read the texts of our own lives and to ask constantly what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved" (p. 10).

Perhaps there is no better evidence for the arguments of Takaki (1993) and Gruenewald (2003) than the American South, and no group of students and teachers who need to explore critically their geographical and cultural context more than Southerners. Pinar (2004) even goes so far as to say that "even should southern schools adopt the most technically accurate and refined curriculum, until the South re-experiences its past in ways that allow it to recover memory and history, (especially white) southern students will not work through it" (p. 241). M. A. Doll (2000), too, has called for studying the texts of the South with a critical eye, saying that "with its legendary myth of hospitality, sweeping oaks, and large pillared plantations, fleshed out by the image of gentlemen in linen suits, the South would like to live as a frozen tableau of elegance in the White imagination" (p. 10). However, just as in the case of America in general, we must not let these myths and stories go without *revision*; we must, as Madeleine R. Grumet (1980/1999) might put it, "enable the student to become the active interpreter of his past" and to "heighten his capacity to be the active agent of his own interests in a present he shares with his community" (p. 28). We must help our students in the work of "finding and telling their own stories" (p. 28), especially in a land that is in some ways more a collection of stories told than anything else.

\* \* \*

*“Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all.”*

(William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1936)

*“History is not truth. Truth is in the telling.”*

(Robert Penn Warren, “Wind and Gibbon,” 1938)

Tell about the South, indeed. In some form or another, and in a wide variety of situations, I have received these same instructions, or some very much like them, countless times during my life. In William Faulkner’s masterpiece *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Northerner Shreve McCannon is asking Southerner Quentin Compson to tell the legendary story of the rise and fall of his Jefferson, Mississippi, neighbor Colonel Sutpen in one of those endless college-dorm conversations, but what he wants to know in general is not much different from what anyone wants to know who calls some other region of the country home: What is this thing we call the South? Some people have asked me this sort of question out of simple, anthropological curiosity, like one might read travel magazines, or National Geographic; some have asked with a sly grin, apparently hoping for one of our famous, Southern “tall tales,” sure to end with a punch line and a slapped knee, if not a toddy. Still others have asked with a distinct tone of challenge in their voices, as if to say “Just try to change my mind about what a backward, ridiculous, ignorant lot you all are.” All of these situations come with a lot of pressure, and I early on began to think that every Southerner might need to be an historian, comedian, and lawyer rolled into one, and that is just to survive dinner parties.

I used to think that in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner had given us a great metaphor for the South, with Colonel Sutpen ripping a plantation, a kingdom, out of the very earth



by the force of his hands, and his will, and his violence, and in the process also sowing the seeds of his own destruction with his hate, and his racism, and his lies that would never hold up. However, the more I have thought about it, the more I have decided that the greatest metaphor for the South in *Absalom, Absalom!* is not Sutpen's life but rather the telling of his story, the piecing-together of a great mythology by two young people in a late night conversation—one “insider” and one “outsider”—out of fragments, hearsay, rumors, legends, strange artifacts, tangential documents, and love letters, and filling in the holes with imagination when nothing else would serve. I started to realize, after being given such an assignment myself numerous times at dinner parties and various other occasions, that I was not only *describing* the South in these conversations; I was also *creating* it, and so was everyone else in a position like mine. Much like one of Mandelbrot's (1983) iterative *feedback* loops, I was both formed by the South and forming the South, over and over, making it, and me, a little different entity each time a story was told.

I came to see that while a large part of our understanding of any place is “created in the mind and through language” (Casemore, 2008, p. 7), this is especially true in the South, and I realized that often, whatever I told people the South was (is), that is what it would be. Few inquirers were going to do the research, visit the towns, look up the characters, check my “facts.” I am not sure it would even matter if they did; the South is not so much a place, or a culture, as it is a story we tell, and stories can never really be “verified”—they are just told. As J. Hillis Miller reminds us in a discussion of Derrida, “witnessing is absolutely individual,” and therefore “no act of testimony can be verified”

(2001b, p. 85), no matter the intentions of the witness. And anyway, the better the story, the less people care how much of it is “true,” whatever that means.

There is, of course, the chance that people will ask more than one Southerner about the South, and that the stories will not match up much, at least in the details, or the tone. This contradiction is actually not the problem it seems like it should be; it is as old as the South, and part of its Story as well. For example, the first thing I do in my Southern Studies class each semester is give every student a blank map of the United States and tell them to draw a border around the South. Very seldom are two maps alike, and pretty soon we are debating who belongs and who does not (Alabama is always in, Florida rarely makes the cut, etc.). Eventually we decide to approach the issue like the Southern academics we are: we discuss the Civil War and football. As for the Civil War, depending on who is asked or when, the Confederacy included Missouri, Oklahoma, Delaware, and Maryland; few students are happy with this selection. Next they decide to look at college athletic conferences, which are hardly more helpful, despite the variety of conferences with “Southern” names. The “Southeastern” conference is a favorite, but does not include a North Carolina or Virginia school; The “Big South” leaves out Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, and others, but includes Pennsylvania; and the “Southern” conference only features schools from Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Is this a silly way to go about settling the geography of the South? Maybe. But the point arrived at by everyone in the class is that we all live in the South, and none of us can say exactly where its boundaries are. Besides, most states confusingly have a “Union” county, anyway, which certainly doesn’t make our cartographic job any easier.

The next thing we do in that class is read H. L. Mencken's "The Sahara of the Bozart" (1920/1998), and then we really start to argue, sometimes heatedly. Mencken really attacks the South in this piece, lobbing bombs of condescension, marching in minions of elegantly dressed verbal barbs, and setting fires in metaphorical effigy. He says the South is "almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert" (p. 370), adds that "it would be impossible in all history to match so complete a drying-up of a civilization" (p. 370), and ends by summing up the South as "a bit pathetic" (p. 378). While my students usually grudgingly agree with parts of what he says and vehemently disagree with other parts, most people seem to ultimately answer Mencken by pointing to what came soon after this piece was published: the Southern Literary Renaissance. Soon, the South was flooded (or at least it looks that way from 80 years later) with men and women of letters, not only good enough to repudiate Mencken, but some who are considered among the best the United States produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The story of the rise to critical acclaim of Faulkner, Margaret Mitchell, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, et. al., has been told countless times, and I will not repeat it here. One of the many things that are interesting about this artistic flourishing, though, is that there came to be something called "Southern Literature," despite the fact that it would be hard to say exactly what kind of animal it is (the South or its literature). Add to that the commonly held idea that people in the South do not read much generally, and care very little about academics, and well, the whole thing gets pretty confusing. Was Mencken right or wrong about the South? We are back to a map we cannot draw, and recognize, as Reta Eugena Whitlock does (2007), that these discussions "reveal a greater

complexity to feeling Southern, which in turn further complicates the conversation of a curriculum of place” (p. 6).

### **Prologue: Based on a True Story?**

Part of the problem in trying to understand what the South was, is, and will be is perhaps due to this much-lauded Southern Renaissance in literature. This great intellectual flourishing was a *creative, imaginative, artistic* flourishing; it was not a *scholarly* one, and certainly not a *critical* one, at least in the traditional academic sense. One can hardly overestimate the importance of this difference. There were certainly historians in the South (the region is famous for its obsessions with the past), and a few notable scholars who were contemporaries of the South’s great literary giants. However, as David Goldfield laments, only “beginning in the 1930s and 1940s with the pioneering work of historians C. Vann Woodward and John Hope Franklin, did southern historians challenge the traditional view of southern history,” and even then “not in earnest until the 1950s” (2002, p. 26). That means the South had about 350 years before any substantial critical, scholarly analysis from historians on the inside, which also means plenty of headaches, I am sure, for historians today who want to revisit those years with a critical eye.

It is also no wonder, perhaps, that current historians can feel as lost as we do when studying the South. David Goldfield (2002) opens his book *Still Fighting the Civil War* by admitting that though he has studied the South more than half of his life, he still “[does] not pretend to understand it yet” (p. 1). Peter Applebome wonders in *Dixie Rising* (1996) if the South is even distinctive anymore as a region, and decides rather that the rest of the country has become too much like it to tell them apart—that the South has

indeed “risen again,” but probably not in the way anyone expected. For example, he explains the “Southernization of America” in terms of politics (Clinton and Gingrich), religion (spread of the Southern Baptist Convention), and areas of culture (NASCAR and country music) partly by pointing out that the South “offers a sense of history, roots, place, and community when the nation desperately is seeking all four” (p. 21). Though Woodward also notes the superficiality of this trend, he sounds suspicious in *The Burden of Southern History* (1993) when he wonders, “Has the Southern heritage become an old hunting jacket that one slips on comfortably while at home but discards when he ventures abroad in favor of some more conventional or modish garb?” (p. 3). In studying the South it soon becomes clear that, no matter the issue, often “there is simply no uncomplicated standpoint to take” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 11).

So what are we all to do if we want to understand the South, lacking much in the way of objective historical account for the vast majority of its existence? Read novels about it? Well, maybe. As James C. Cobb points out in *Away Down South* (2005), “in the absence of a critical historical tradition, southern writers began to ask how such an appealing and glorious past could have degenerated into such a dismal and defective present,” hoping to “sort out the myths and inconsistencies” (p. 130). Woodward agrees, arguing for “some acknowledgment of the genuine debt the historians owe to the poets, playwrights, and novelists—particularly the novelists—as well as an acknowledgment of vital relations between the crafts” (1993, p. 27). Joel Williamson does just such a thing in *The Crucible of Race* (1984), comparing the work of Woodward and Faulkner on the South: “Faulkner was critical of the South for what it had become; C. Vann Woodward defended the South for what it might yet be” (p. 501).

But this kind of statement from Williamson likely causes some to squirm, and at least should make us pause to ask whether we can really treat William Faulkner (novelist) and C. Vann Woodward (historian) as if they work in the same field. Even Woodward admits that “Faulkner himself read little history,” and warns that when it comes to Faulkner’s books, “any reader of the novels who expects enlightenment about history in the usual sense will be disappointed” (p. 279). Kincheloe, Pinar, and Slattery (1994) note that “while students of place do not wish to confuse myth and history, the line between the two is often blurred” (p. 412), and it seems that line, when it comes to the South, is so blurry it is often hard to find at all. While one certainly should not go to fiction expecting non-fiction (and vice versa), how are we to approach such distinctions in a place full of writers who do not seem interested in making those distinctions themselves? Are we ever really dealing with “history in the usual sense” when we talk about the South?

As Peggy Kamuf asks and attempts to answer in her *Book of Addresses* (2005), “How can we take fiction seriously?” (p. 135). She later states that “a fiction refers to nothing that exists. It refers, but to nothing in existence” (p. 139), which would certainly cause problems for those who want to discover through literature what the South *is* rather than what it *is not*. However, she does not mean that “fiction” is a synonym for *falsity* or *lie*, but that it “remains irreducibly suspended between the world of presupposed referents, which it can never fully suspend, and this same everything-of-the-world, everything-in-the-world from which it hangs suspended . . . . It is the possibility of world, of possible, virtual, fictional worlds, of other worlds” (p. 144). Fiction, then, “hangs suspended” between what *is* and what *is not*. There are few better descriptions of the South than that.

So if the South itself is fictional, is a story we tell—and a good one full of ghosts and ghouls and gore and glory, of tragedy and triumph and tribulation unending—it is no wonder that so much of the study of it, so much of its history, literature, music, politics, religion, “hangs suspended” as well, always between what *is* and what *is not*. For a couple of examples, we can look at W. J. Cash and Eudora Welty. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* (1941) is a landmark text that would influence all who followed in Southern studies, and at first it feels much like a history book. There are no characters or plot devices, and the things he says certainly *feel* like facts. But eventually one notices the narrative tone, the racism, and the absence of copious footnotes, or documentation of any kind, really. Finally, one begins to wonder just why Cash feels like he can say what he does. So much of it feels insightful, and incisive, especially in his early discussions of the formation of the Southern character—but it is just a feeling, after all, and many have found that in attacking the myths of the Old South, Cash seems to “substitute one romantic legend for another” (Cobb, 2005, p. 172). Eudora Welty once found herself more accidentally guilty of crossing the line between fiction and non-fiction, in a way for which she should likely be admired instead of vilified. After the murder of Medgar Evers, Welty sat down to write “Where is the Voice Coming From?” (1963), trying to get inside the head of a man who could have committed the crime. When the killer was arrested, Welty realized that her story was so close to what actually happened that she reportedly had to make last minute changes in order to avoid legal trouble (Gwin and Harris, 1998, p. 619). While no one is suggesting that Welty was either involved or clairvoyant, it is interesting that in this case a Southern writer’s imagination was so close to “reality” as to be indistinguishable.

In the South, maybe Woodward and Faulkner do work in the same field; maybe the history is the literature and the literature is the history, and in this place truly “of myth and legend,” maybe there is no line between “fiction” and “non-fiction” at all, between the “imaginary construct” (Casmore, 2008, p. 67) and some “real” South, or at least it is too faint or too trampled under to find. The Story of the South *is* the South, and so to the stories we must go if we want to know it, if we want to make the place part of the curriculum, and especially if we want to *revise* it.

But before we do, a couple of nagging issues remain. First, it has become pretty clear at this late date that the Story that is the South does not have one author only; it is a tapestry of interwoven story threads in which the edges are never quite tied off, which makes it hard to tell if it is growing or being unraveled (just ask Applebome and Woodward). There are countless voices, though some are louder than others, and some of the characters and motifs repeat over and over, though they look different depending on who is doing the weaving. And anyone can add a story, or retell one, but to erase what has already been told is nearly impossible, like finding and pulling one thread from a blanket that stretches over the Mississippi and covers 400 years—no wonder Woodward calls it a “burden.” This tapestry of stories that make up the South is where Mencken was wrong; in all his searching for (and not finding) opera houses, philosophers, and “important” books, he failed to notice he was looking at the living, breathing, Great American Novel called The South (what other kind of novel would America write?). I guess he can be forgiven for not realizing this, since he was reading what was apparently a “dry” part of it.



Secondly, there is the issue of reading in the South, or the lack thereof. In a classic example of Southern Literature hanging somewhere between fiction and non-fiction, Walker Percy once conducted an interview with himself entitled “Questions They Never Asked Me *So He Asked Them Himself*” (1977/1986), in which he discussed (with himself?) many issues surrounding writing in the South. Lest anyone think he was taking any of this very seriously, he begins with “**Question:** Will you consent to an interview? **Answer:** No,” and continues to say “I’m sick and tired of talking about the South and hearing about the South” (p. 702). Later, he talks about his life as a writer in the South, and says that “people don’t read much in the South and don’t take writers very seriously, which is probably as it should be” (705), further recounting stories of people who want to know what he *really* does when he tells them he is a writer. In fact, Percy thinks Faulkner became a great writer *because* the people around him largely ignored him and his work.

So, how can the South be a story if no one reads it? Well, it is probably more the case that few read *books about it*, or books in general. To many, the South is not really in a book, though; it is more like a story everybody thinks they know already, because they live it. If they have heard the Story that is the South for 400 years (because no one in the South lives only in one lifetime, but in every lifetime since his family has been part of the Story), why read what some strange little writer-fellow has to say about it in a book? Even if what he says is drastically different than the Story as it has been told, or even critical of that Story, people can dismiss him as an oddity, a “local character” (Percy, 1977/1986, p. 705), like Robinson Crusoe doing tricks for a herd of goats, as Percy puts it. And as for stories of other lands, what could top the Story that is the South? Part of

the Story is that it is the greatest story ever told, except maybe the one in the Bible, and people in the South already know that one too.

### **Once Upon a Time**

As for what kind of tale the Story that is the South is, one should probably start at the beginning. Among the many memorable statements with which W. J. Cash (1941) filled his *The Mind of the South* is this summary of his subject: “The South, one might say, is a tree with many age rings, with its limbs and trunk bent and twisted by all the winds of the years, but with its tap root in the Old South” (p. 1). The Story that is the South begins here, too, quite naturally, despite the conventional idea that no one in the South did any good writing until the late 1920s. As Goldfield (2002) tells us, the stories began “from the time the first African stepped onto the shores of North America” (p. 187) in the early sixteenth century, since “slavery, in fact, demanded that whites rationalize the holding of human property” (p. 187). Just as the earliest myths in recorded history sought to explain what could not be rationally or experimentally explained, so did the Story that is the South begin by explaining that “slavery is a civilizing force”; without it Africans would “revert to barbarism”; and best of all for the African, under slavery he would “[receive] the Christian religion” and gain his “place in heaven” (p. 188).

This may have been a hard story to swallow at first, and there is some evidence here and there that not everyone wanted to take part in it. Melissa Fay Greene says in *Praying for Sheetrock* (1991) that early Georgia colonists in Darien at first resisted the slave system, penning the “earliest antislavery petition in North America” in 1739, which called slavery “shocking to human nature” (p. 102). However, the system was approved in nearby places, and these petitioners soon changed their minds; by 1790, “70

percent of the population of the Georgia coast were slaves” (p. 102). Though such a system was obviously economically profitable, these early objections suggest that it was the Story that let people in the South sleep at night with a quiet conscience. From this taproot story, as Cash might call it, one can see all the story threads expanding in all directions like Cash’s tree, largely unchecked until the Civil War in the 1860s. It takes no great stretch of the imagination to see how such a story leads to the eventual myths of gallant Christian knights in gray, so good that even their slaves love them; pure virginal belles so dainty and proper any indecency might give them “the vapors”; the child-like innocent “yassuh” slaves and their mirror-image beastly, murderous counterparts; and the more general golden-toned picture of the South as a fantasy land of slow time, where all commune with nature and each other, living an easy life of peaceful harmony and prosperity.

Just as parts of the Story caused objections from the beginning, there were a few holes poked in it every now and then over the years, but none so strong that it all came apart. For one, because so much of the nation’s “literary and publishing activity” (Cobb, 2005, p. 12) was concentrated in the North, early writing about the South often took the form of “foreign travelers’ descriptions” (p. 12) which emphasized the difference between the North and South. In many of these stories, like Royall Tyler’s 1797 *The Algerian Captive*, the South’s role was a villainous one, cast as a descendant of the “greedy, materialistic, and depraved colonial world” which might “topple the young republic” (p. 15). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852 was probably the most damaging blow to the Southern Story, since it “stripped the slaveholding system of its genteel, anti-capitalist pretensions” (p. 31). But while such stories might have turned

many outside the South against it and its way of life, they also seemed to have helped unite the people of the South by giving them a common enemy.

Many Southerners predictably claimed that such stories distorted the “truth” about conditions in the South; whether they had bought into the now-hundreds-of-years-old Story or merely held tighter to it as a defense mechanism is largely unclear. One benefit, though, of living a life that “hangs suspended” between what *is* and what *is not* is that the line between fiction and non-fiction can be adjusted upon attack; one can seem to choose which works are “just fiction” and which are “the truth” depending on which story suits one best; the same kind of people who called *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* fiction—the nicest term they might use—were inspired to action by the warning they saw in Thomas Dixon’s 1902 work *The Leopard’s Spots* and its depiction of “the retrogression of the American negro” (Williamson, 1984, p. 141) into the “black beast rapist” that supposedly terrorized the South after the Civil War. Though by the 1920s, Dixon’s “extravagant romanticism” and “extremism in race relations” had become an “embarrassment” even in the South (p. 141), it was popular enough early on to have sold “nearly a million copies,” or “one copy for every eight Americans” (p. 158). In short, there is no telling how many lives were changed for the worse, or even brutally ended, due in large part to the inspiration from a book that no one even reads anymore and few remember at all. Apparently some Southerners do read, though, especially when a story fits nicely into the larger Story that is the South. One interesting fact about Dixon’s book is that from “1900 to 1909, the number of lynchings declined by half” (p. 185); the greatest number of lynchings occurred in the 1890s. Did Dixon write part of the Story of the South through his book, or did the Story write him?

One of the most interesting cases of a Southern man whose life “hung suspended” is Thomas Jefferson. The same man who wrote that “all men are created equal” was a slave owner himself; in fact, though many say that he “personally felt guilty about his slave ownership” and “supported an effort for the emancipation of slaves” (Takaki, 1993, p. 69) as a member of the Virginia legislature, he still owned 267 slaves in 1822 (p. 69). His autobiography (published 1830) even states that a draft of the Declaration of Independence called for the abolition of slavery, but that part was struck out “in complaisance to South Carolina and Georgia” (1998, p. 36). He once even had to answer for this duplicity when challenged by a friend, the freeborn son of a former slave, Benjamin Banneker. The 1791 letter Banneker wrote to Jefferson on the matter is careful and respectful, while also pointed and impressively argued, and great evidence itself of his point in support of Africans. He quotes Jefferson’s words in the Declaration back to him, and then wonders “how pitiable it is to reflect” that Jefferson was so “fully convinced . . . of his [God’s] equal and impartial distribution of these rights and privileges” but still persisted in “detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of [Banneker’s] brethren” (1998, p. 57). Jefferson’s short reply (1791/1998, p. 58), written while he was still Secretary of State, basically says “You are right, I just wish I could do more” (“nobody wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced . . .”). It is hard to imagine today how heavy the burden of the Southern Story must have been to man like Jefferson, even nearly 100 years before the Civil War.

### **The Big Scene**

Though growing objections to the institution of slavery in other parts of the country no doubt helped solidify what we call the “South” in the early decades of the

nineteenth century, the Story that is the South was likely not a fully realized, shared part of our American, or Southern, consciousness until after the Civil War. After the War, having faced the first very serious challenge to the early drafts of the Story of the South and lost, Southerners retold (*revised*) the Story, this time with more vigor and focusing on the “Lost Cause,” a resolution that the Old South had been a glorious golden age, a righteous cause valiantly defended against overwhelming odds. As Goldfield (2002) puts it, “the invention of the Old South gave white southerners a tradition, a sense of continuity in a destabilized postwar world” (p. 20). Focusing the Story that is the South on the past actually gave it more power and longevity, since the facts about those years were now simply the stuff of (creative) memory, not staring one in the face all the time as the kind of ever-present contradiction through which people like Jefferson had to suffer. In fact, this new and improved, *revised* Story was so successful and widespread that many are still shocked to hear that the “South” as we often describe it was actually hard to find before the War; for one, Southerners in those years “identified with their localities, perhaps their state, but rarely with an entity called ‘the South’” (p. 17).

In fact, one of the most effective aspects of Cash’s *The Mind of the South* (1941) is his deconstruction of the Old South myth. One of the very first things Cash attacks is the idea of Southern aristocratic, “Cavalier” roots, arguing quite sensibly that “such men do not embark on frail ships for a dismal frontier where savages prowl and slay, and living is a grim and laborious ordeal” (p. 3); rather, he says that the men who we would eventually call the “planter elite” were rewarded for having the “rough and ready hands” (p. 6) of the laborer. Further, he argues that it was “1800 before the advance of the plantation was really under way” (p. 10), and even then it developed slowly, as the cotton

gin had just been invented. He says that “it was actually 1820 before the plantation was fully on the march” and points out that “1820 to 1860 is but forty years—a little more than the span of a single generation” (p. 10). In other words, if there ever was an “Old South” as it appears in the Story, its lifespan was a scant 40 years out of the roughly 260 year history of the South before the War. Even the “great white-columned house” was not so great, it seems; Cash calls it “just a box, with four rooms, bisected by a hallway, set on four more rooms bisected by another hallway, and a detached kitchen at the back” (pp. 15-16). If anything, its size simply made it “imposing” (p. 16).

But by the time Cash had published this deconstruction, the Story had grown in size and importance for almost 80 years, and would not be taken down so quickly. As Cobb (2005) explains, tellers of the “Lost Cause” story had pieced together a “remarkably seamless historical justification” for the antebellum Southern way of life; slavery was really a “benign, civilizing institution,” the South had seceded to secure “individual and state rights,” and when attacked, Southerners really had no choice but to “take up arms in defense of their homeland and their honor” (p. 62). The result is “heritage,” or a faith, not “history,” says Goldfield (2002), and this heritage “was not merely a convenient rendering of the past to salve troubled minds and hearts; it was a divinely inspired vision that captured the white southern soul” (p. 33). Once every (white) Southerner had a saintly soldier in gray memorialized, whose fantastic war exploits were and are the pride of the family, it became hard to tell him otherwise.

How appropriate then, that once the Story that is the South had been so fully and gloriously rendered, it would be attacked and defended not by battalions of serious historians armed with facts and details, but by storytellers. It is incredibly telling that

Goldfield (2002) says the “Old South became a *Gone With the Wind* set” (p. 34), because that is, quite literally, what happened to it; in fact, Scarlett’s father Gerald O’Hara seems as if he was modeled on Cash’s “stout young Irishman” (1941, p. 14), except that Mitchell’s character was created first. Though books like Dixon’s (1902) pre-dated it, and so did Mitchell’s novel (1915), it was during the Southern Literary Renaissance that the South fully became a Story, and not just a lived one, but one people could find on the shelves, or the screen, in the case of *Gone With the Wind* (1939). This period can roughly be dated from Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) to the time when people actually began reading Faulkner in large numbers, post-Nobel Prize in the 1950’s, before giving way to the Civil Rights era. If we wanted to go with the conventional idea of the South’s Story as a “divinely inspired” (Goldfield, 2002, p. 33) book rather than the tapestry it is, the Civil Rights era could be seen as a kind of back cover to the main text of the Story that is the South, just as the Civil War could work like its front cover.

The literature during this time, perhaps not surprisingly, “hangs suspended” somewhere between fiction and non-fiction, especially for today’s readers. For many of us, these texts *are* our history books; for example, the Old South in my head is an odd mix of Faulkner, Cash, and *Gone With the Wind* (the film): something I will always hold at arm’s length, unsure of its authenticity, and something I realize I will not likely get any closer to—and not only was I born in the South, but my uncle tells me there are characters in Mitchell’s work named after my ancestors. This ambiguity, though, this “hanging suspended,” also seems to be true of the writers of these works as well, whether we are looking at Cash’s fictional history (?) or Faulkner’s historical fiction (?). Sometimes the Story that is the South is even the subject of the literary works themselves,



as is the case with Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" (1955), in which a poor white grandfather and his grandson bond on a trip to Atlanta, despite numerous reasons not to, because they share the experience of seeing, and hating, an "artificial nigger"—a "plaster figure of a Negro sitting bent over on a low yellow brick fence that curved around a wide lawn" (p. 127). The story is a brilliant and caustic reminder that "Jim Crow" was a minstrel act in every sense, the name even deriving from a popular minstrel act created by white northerner Thomas Rice (Goldfield, 2002, p. 202); the much-feared enemy who inspired a segregated South was often a white man in blackface, a ghost story invaluable to the great Story, a creation of a haunted conscience.

Some writers seem to have taken things directly from historical experience and turned them into literature, further blurring the boundaries between life-lived and life-told. Faulkner took many of his characters and plot seeds from lived experience, or even his own family history; the character of Colonel John Sartoris from *The Unvanquished* (1934) is heavily based on Faulkner's own grandfather, and though Woodward (1993) notes that "Faulkner's huge cast of fictional characters was by no means limited to those resembling relatives or ancestors or their slaves" (p. 277), there are plenty who do. Lillian Smith also seems to write out of history in her *Strange Fruit* (1944), which is set in the 1920s and tells the love (?) story of Tracy Deen and Nonnie Anderson—a white young man home from the war and an educated, black young woman. The story ends tragically, with Tracy shot dead by Nonnie's brother after rejecting her and Tracy's (black) friend Henry being lynched for a crime he could never have committed. While it reads like the skilled narration of true events, it is not based on any particular story, but on an all-too-common series of occurrences in the South. Smith also has Nonnie say at

one point that “Race is something—made up, to me. Not real. I don’t—have to believe in it” (p. 95), which is something noted historian Williamson (1984) echoes at the end of his *The Crucible of Race*: “There are, essentially, no such things as ‘black’ people or ‘white’ people” (p. 522). Williamson, it should be noted, also asserts elsewhere that in some respects, and despite its obvious romantic tint, “*Gone With the Wind* was profoundly historical” (p. 446), especially in its depiction of the harsh life of Reconstruction.

Another work that blurs the history/literature line is Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (1946), which uses as its raw material the life of Louisiana politician Huey Long and is “generally considered the finest novel ever written on American politics,” according to its back cover. But what is a “novel” of American politics? Does it tell us the truth about the South, ourselves, and our political leaders, despite its admission that it is a work of fiction? Sometimes, indeed, Warren’s main character, Jack Burden, seems to know the South, and the “burden” of its history (as his name suggests?), as well as any living, breathing historian, even though he is a fictional reporter who works for a fictional governor—who often looks like a very real man. Having abandoned his own historical studies afraid that “the truth was not to be discovered” (p. 236), Burden spends much of the novel like a true Southerner, or an “Idealist,” as he calls it, ignoring what he does not want to know and claiming that because he does not know it, it is not real. As he says, “If you are an Idealist it does not matter what you do or what goes on around you because it isn’t real anyway” (p. 45). It seems in many ways that the South after the Civil Rights era had (has?) to choose between Jack Burden at the beginning of the book, or Jack

Burden at the end of the book, the one who goes “out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time” (p. 661). Either way, though, there will still be a Burden.

### **The End?**

Eventually, some of the Story’s obvious falsehoods could not be ignored anymore, and the Civil Rights movement ushered in a time of renewed violence, as some sought to tear down once and for all the Story that is the South and its stranglehold on the people who lived beneath that great tapestry, and others fought literally tooth and nail (and firehose) to make sure it stayed intact. Jean-Francois Lyotard announced in 1979 that “the grand narrative has lost its credibility” (p. 37), and while he does not seem to have meant the Story of the South in particular, it sounds like he could have. But what would the South be without what Southerners would certainly see as the grandest of “grand narratives”? Could there be a postmodern South? Neither historians nor writers of fiction seem very sure. Applebome (1996) seems to think that the South has both won and lost of late, creating the rest of the country in its own image but losing regional distinctiveness in the process. Still, he asserts that what we make of the South today is one of our most vital issues, saying that “what kind of a nation we become will depend in large part on which Southern vision becomes the nation: the narrow one that’s ascendant or the broader one that’s hovered just out of reach for so long” (p. 343).

Applebome’s assessment falls somewhat in line with Cash’s earlier argument that many of the South’s elements “are readily recognizable as being simply variations on the primary American theme” (1941, p. xlvi). He saw the Southern American as a rugged man of the frontier (p. 30), driven by “intense individualism” (p. 31), featuring a strong “tendency to violence” (p. 43), often shaping his world view with “imagination” (p. 45)

rather than realism, and exhibiting a “faith as simple and emotional as himself” (p. 56)—all characteristics easy to find in people across the country today. Woodward (1993) still makes a case for a Southern regional distinction, arguing that traditional American characteristics like “economic abundance” (p. 16), consistent “success” (p. 18), an “innocence” (p. 19) of character and deed, the idea of being “born free” (p. 21), and a general attitude of “abstraction” (p. 22) are all things which Southerners cannot say they share with other Americans, at least to the same degree. For this reason, the Story that is the South is still an important one, at least for everyone else to learn from.

In literature, being at least more free of the “burden” that is the South’s Story than their forbears, contemporary writers in the South have taken varied approaches to their homeland and its mythology. While much of pop culture has seemed to deal with the South as caricature for comedic or melodramatic effect—as evidenced by the Blue Collar Comedy Tour, the light comedy *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), and the neo-Klan film adaptation of John Grisham’s *A Time to Kill* (1996)—literary works have often taken much more nuanced, varied approaches. Greene’s *Praying for Sheetrock* (1991) is as close to the fiction/non-fiction line as anything since Cash; though it says “A Work of Nonfiction” on the title page, it reads much like a classic Southern novel (a mirror image of Smith’s work?), and the story of “Sheriff Poppell’s most famous escapade” (pp. 235-239) would fit nicely alongside Faulkner’s fictional telling of Colonel Sartoris’s comedic, quick-thinking escape from the Yankee army or Granny Rosa’s horse-stealing scam in *The Unvanquished* (1934). Many of Walker Percy’s novels, such as *The Moviegoer* (1961), *The Last Gentleman* (1966), and *Lancelot* (1977), are set in the South, but the characters often seem to suffer many of the same difficulties and show the same kind of

disillusionment that could be found anywhere in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite its sensationalized film treatment, James Dickey's novel *Deliverance* (1970) focuses on the shrinking distance between the suburban South and the rural one, and the possible violence of such culture clashes.

Other writers, like North Carolina's Fred Chappell in *I Am One of You Forever* (1985) focus often on the more positive aspects of the Story that is (was?) the South, like its emphasis on home, family, community, and offbeat sense of humor. Some others seem to be asking in their work whether the Story is even relevant today, like Bobbie Ann Mason (1982/1998) does in "Shiloh," a story in which the female protagonist's mother repeatedly and incredibly insists that a trip to the famous battleground will save her marriage. When the couple, who do not know any history and do not want to, finally do take the trip, their last, Leroy is disappointed—"he thought it would look like a golf course" (p. 966), and admits that "he can only think of that war as a board game with plastic soldiers" (p. 967).

Perhaps the answer, if one can be found, about what the Story that is the South will be in the future, or which directions it will take, depends on what kind of students of the South our young people become; perhaps it really does depend on what kinds of stories we all tell at dinner parties. Maybe the Story will go the way of so many other "grand narratives" and disappear, or at least be roundly discredited; maybe people will doggedly hold on to a past that probably never was, writing a neo-Lost Cause story; or maybe the Story that is the South will change and grow, as parts of it are worn away and discarded and other story threads are added. One of Cash's most astute observations about the South comes from his criticism of it as "extremely uncomplex, unvaried, and

unchanging” (p. 95), which he says gave Southerners a simpleness of mind that kept them from ever dealing analytically with their land, their fellow people, and their history. Such analysis, he says, is “largely the outcome of two things: the need to understand a complex environment . . . and social dissatisfaction” (p. 97). But the South Cash knew is in many ways no longer the South we know; our South *is* complex, and so is the world around it, and many of its people are socially dissatisfied, now that more of them are allowed a voice to express those feelings. Kincheloe, Pinar, and Slattery (1994) sound optimistic, positing that “if we can reintegrate those elements of our history and culture split off and denied,” we might just find that it would “animate a cultural and educational renewal of the South” (1994, p. 434). Perhaps a postmodern South is possible, if only we will raise up with a *revised* curriculum generations of Southerners capable of analysis in an increasingly complex world; perhaps the great tapestry will still be woven, only now with far more hands, featuring far more colors, by people who understand that the Story that is the South is one whose ends never have to be tied off.

*Chapter 6***The Useless Studying the Useless: Aesthetics in Contemporary****American Education**

*“All art is quite useless.”*

(Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891/1998)

*Aesthetics* is a funny-sounding, funny-spelled, little-used word in our culture today, unless it is to say something is “aesthetically pleasing”—and even then, we usually mean some member of the opposite sex is attractive but we have grown tired of saying such a thing in the same old way, as if our taste in men or women is for the moment a refined, artistic interest. We are kidding, of course, when we say something like this, and part of the joke is that we might take aesthetics seriously. However, this attitude toward aesthetics, especially in curriculum, is in real need of *revision*. For example, M. F. Abrams tells us that the term is most often attached to a particular school of French writers in the late nineteenth century who certainly did take aesthetics seriously, believing that “a work of art is the supreme value among human production,” and that it is so important “precisely because it is self-sufficient and has no use or moral aim outside its own being” (1999, p. 3).

Oscar Wilde says much the same thing in his introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891/1998); his statement is also a joke, but this time the joke is on us, or at least all of us who hear that “all art is quite useless” and quickly join in with “Amen! What a waste of time.” Wilde, though, was an aesthete, and as such believed that art is not a *tool* for anything necessarily, or a *means* to accomplish some goal; rather, it *is* the

goal. This perspective gives art, and all things beautiful in this same way, very little of what we might call “exchange value” today; unfortunately, we often say one cannot really *do* anything with art, or knowledge about the arts, and certainly not with a degree in the arts, and so we have no *use* for it, especially in our schools, or for Wilde’s argument that it does not need to be *used*. We often respond to Wilde like Lynch replies to Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916/1994), though not nearly as playfully, when he grows tired of Stephen’s “esthetic philosophy” and says “I don’t care about it . . . I want a job of five hundred a year. You can’t get me one” (pp. 150-151). And it is not just true that arts education is increasingly going under-funded, under-supported, and under-appreciated, but we are also practicing a curriculum that is less *aesthetic* in every sense of the word in every field. The results of such an attitude and approach, however, are not surprisingly often ugly, and may keep us from ever really experiencing many of the very things we say are the most important things (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness come to mind). It would be hard to assess happiness or beauty on a spreadsheet, after all. When we cut art and aesthetics out of our schools, or any other kind of everyday experience, we often end up living lives that are not very beautiful, either.

Making aesthetics an important and pervasive part of our curriculum is no new, radical idea, though. For example, three decades ago curriculum theorist William F. Pinar compared his teaching philosophy to the way Jackson Pollock painted in “Working From Within” (1972/1994). Pinar begins this comparison with a confession: “Regularly I walk into class without a preconceived lesson plan” (p. 7)—instead, he begins his classes the way Pollock began his work, with “a general notion of what [he is] up to,” but with



“no preliminary sketches” (p. 7). It is not that he is often unprepared, but rather that he comes to class “ready to respond, not only as a student and teacher of literature, but as a person” (p. 9); in other words, he knows his discipline, but he resists the urge to simply participate in a one-way information exchange. Instead, he tries to “make cognitive and emotional contact” (p. 9) with his students in a way that moves past expectations, planned results, and students saying “things that they think [he] might like to hear” (p. 9). This direct connection with students and subject matter, this opening of oneself to conversation, to being alive in the moment, is what he calls “working from within,” and it is a learning experience that looks beyond report cards. Such an approach recognizes, accepts, and even celebrates the possibilities of complexity, the dynamic, fractal beauty available in our classrooms. Like Pollock’s paintings, this kind of learning cannot be predicted or pre-scribed, and it is often more beautiful and powerful for it.

However, Pinar would not likely be a popular man in today’s public high school setting; he might be able to *argue* how substantial his students’ school experiences are, or to tell powerful stories, but he would be hard pressed to explain these things with an Excel document. What we are interested in across our culture today, but especially in our NCLB-driven schools, is not so much *learning* or *growth*, but “results”: efficiently produced, quantifiable, saleable commodities that will buy us another day, another grade, another step, another acceptance letter, another trophy of a number to put in a box on a spreadsheet. And we do not have time to sit and talk, to let moments (and lives) develop like Pinar does, because we want those results immediately. Our work has become almost completely “end-oriented,” or “programmed, focused, organized in an authoritarian fashion *in view of its utilization*” (Derrida, 2004, p. 141). For example, we

use an online gradebook system in my county, available 24 hours a day to administrators, teachers, students, and parents, and some of my brightest students check it obsessively whenever a computer is available. I have even heard rumors of some of them checking their class rank in the guidance office every two weeks. And what is more, as their grades grow in importance, the learning that is supposed to be represented by those numbers seems to decrease, in importance, substance, and longevity—the “result” is what matters, not how it is achieved, or why. We talk often about students becoming life-long learners, though really we are graduating young people who have bought their future on credit but cash their checks every Friday, blow them by Monday, and remember nothing about the experience. Many of the ones who leave with a diploma are taking little else with them. When the bill comes (and bills always come) for such an approach to curriculum, what will it look like, and how ugly will it be, exactly? Who will pay it, and how?

I encountered one example of this approach to education, and saw just how much the work of *revision* is needed, recently when I was invited to participate in a roundtable discussion in a meeting after school. We were scheduled to discuss an article by Richard DuFour (2004) entitled “What is a Professional Learning Community?”; however, I was too distracted by the section of the article called “Big Idea #3: A Focus on Results” to think much about whether this program could produce “results.” The “results” in question here and in discussions like these are almost invariably higher test scores of some sort, the measuring stick by which we determine who is “high performing” and who is not. As DuFour notes, every teacher “can easily establish the mean, mode, median, standard deviation, and percentage of students who demonstrate proficiency every time

he or she administers a test” (p. 40). He may be right, but is that really why we are here, why we get up in the morning? I understand the role grades play, the need for some standardized tests, the keeping of attendance, the careful records we maintain of our resources—I see the point made by John Franklin Bobbitt and the other “efficiency-minded educators” he has inspired (Kliebard, 2004, p. 83). But education does split from accounting exercises somewhere, does it not? Are these the only “results” we care about?

In our schools today, as William E. Doll, Jr. (1993) tells us, “the individual is both subordinate to and embedded within the objectives,” and since the ends are always “predetermined,” our system is “an ideal one to measure” (p. 126). However, this reduction of students to numbers, percentages, demographics—to measurable “results”—is de-meaning and depressing, to teachers and students alike, and it is certainly ugly. I had a student recently who studied such issues for a senior project that culminated in a presentation to a panel of judges. To express to those judges the effect that this current educational attitude causes, she took pictures of all of her friends holding signs in front of their chests with their SAT scores on them. Their faces, though, were cut out of the pictures, as if they did not matter. And she is right—they do not matter to us, these whole, full, complex people, at least not enough. In *Arts of the Possible* (2001), poet Adrienne Rich laments today’s general “devaluation of language” and “flattening of images” until everything is little more than an “inert and always obsolescent commodity” (p. 149). In public education today, we are even worse; we flatten whole people, and will soon flatten a whole generation, if we do not change course. We must remember that just as the arts are *useless*, so are our students *useless*; they are people, and as such are to be

*taught* and *guided* and *helped*, but not to be *used*, even to make ourselves look better by their “performance.”

In our mad rush to quantify, and increase what we can quantify, we too often ignore all else, forgetting not only that those numbers are supposed to represent significant changes in some part of the lives of real, complex people, but also that too much focus on “results” can also give us cramming, cheating, poor work habits, teaching to the test, and thin, superficial motivation (at best). Each assignment, each course, each year becomes a box to check off on the way to—well, something we do not actually talk about very much. Our students are asked to answer thousands of questions before they graduate, but Anthony T. Kronman (2007) is right: “the question of what living is for” (p. 7), of what makes for a full, meaningful life, is not often one of them. In short, as Patricia Clifford and Sharon Friesen (2003) say, today “schools are, generally speaking, intellectually boring places, uninteresting both for the students compelled to attend them and for adults hired to work in them” (p. 92).

I have sometimes felt very much like Jonathan Kozol’s elementary school teacher in *The Shame of the Nation* (2005), who cannot teach William Butler Yeats for the beauty of his verse or the joyful exploration of poetry, but must justify on some official form in a “recognized compartment” why the poem was read, with something like “in order to deliver Elementary Standard 37-A” (p. 76). There may be, as a “top adviser” on education in our federal government told Kozol, “something crystal clear about a number” (p. 78) that says a “standard” was reached with “proficiency.” But I think Kozol was right to agree with Thomas Sobol, a former state commissioner of education in New York, when Sobol said that “we are giving kids less and calling it more” (p. 131)

when we limit curriculum to those “crystal clear” numbers. I do not think those numbers tell the whole story, they are not why I teach, and they are certainly not why I teach poetry or anything else “aesthetically pleasing.”

I teach not for “learning the course” but for “discovering what courses within” (Doll, 2000, p. 77); I want students to *dis-cover* their lives, not learn to *cover* material. I went into teaching, and continue to teach, because I am on a never-ending quest in search for “IT,” the flash of inspiration, the sudden clarity, the moment, the epiphany, the *revision*, the changed direction, the shared real experience—the “IT” that cannot be quantified and would be insulted by a spreadsheet. I look for the “IT” with my students that Jack Kerouac’s Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty look for in *On the Road* (1955) and sometimes find, like the jazzman who can “put down what’s on everybody’s mind” (pp. 207-208):

“He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of old ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the time of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT”—Dean could go no further; he was sweating telling about it.

Yale University’s Kronman seems to agree in *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (2007) with Kerouac’s approach to life in this regard, saying somewhat more academically (if a little less colorfully) the kind of thing Dean Moriarty might have, if Dean Moriarty had a Ph. D.:

The human study of the world thus begins and ends in wonder, and the wonder it produces is a state we enjoy for its own sake and independently of the utility of

the discoveries that fill us with astonishment—independently of what these discoveries are good *for*. (p. 216)

Not only do I think that such a “wonder-full” quest is guided by aesthetics, and that there is still room for aesthetics in curriculum, but I also think that there is a *need* for these kinds of studies, for these kinds of experiences, maybe today more than ever. I want for school to be the kind of beautiful experience we sweat to tell about, and I still think that—with *revision*—it can be.

### **What’s So Funny ‘Bout Peace, Love and Understanding?**

*“As I walk on / Through troubled times /  
My spirit gets so downhearted sometimes . . .  
What’s so funny ‘bout peace, love, and understanding?”*

(Nick Lowe, 1973)

The words are Nick Lowe’s officially, but the snarling, angry, rebellious voice singing in my head belongs to Elvis Costello, driven along by rough-edged guitars and a propulsive rhythm section. At first listen, one might easily be confused by the tone of Costello’s angry demand for peace, love, and understanding in a “wicked world” shrouded instead in “pain and hatred, and misery.” But to me, Elvis Costello sounds like a teacher, down to the “each time I feel it slippin’ away, just makes me wanna cry” that leads to the chorus. Schools today are not often places full of “peace” and “love” unfortunately, and we have even decided to take “results” in place of “understanding” lately, at least in a larger sense (“what is the answer?” instead of “why should I care?”). As for the “pain and hatred, and misery” Costello sees everywhere, just stop any teenager in a school hallway and ask for honesty.

Alan A. Block (1997) even wrote an entire book about the negative experience that school too often is, called *I’m Only Bleeding: Education as the Practice of Violence*

*Against Children.* The schools Block studies are not places full of the open conversations Pinar describes, but are rather characterized by the all-too-familiar, and telling, phrase “lock down.” In his experience, students today are in fact “locked down,” literally and figuratively, mostly sitting in their desks “immobile and barely conscious,” held down by the “strictures of the school that deny play, risk-taking, and creativity” (p. 67). And even when we are not using prison language like “lock down” to describe procedures at our schools, we often borrow concepts from the corporate world, as if running a business and running a school had very much in common. As Block puts it, “schools are organized to ‘produce good citizens,’ a phrase that usually means good workers” (p. 118). However, though they will definitely need some kind of job, and they do occasionally get in trouble, our students are not criminals or corporate automatons in training, and they are certainly not “products” that we run off a conveyor belt, despite our “assembly line model” of education (Doll, Jr., 1993, p. 43); they are *people*—living, breathing, complex people, with varied interests, backgrounds, values, and desires. And what is more, *so are we*, no matter how much we try not to act like it. It is actually kind of funny that teachers who are not corporate or criminal so often use the concepts of those worlds in teaching young people who are also not corporate or criminal.

In fact, another reason Costello’s version of Lowe’s song is so apt is that the only things a school might laugh at are “peace, love, and understanding”—or the aesthetics that might teach people to appreciate those things. Schools are notorious for having a pretty terrible sense of humor, being run by governments that are also pretty humorless, which is part of what makes them so funny—and yes, that is irony, another thing schools have trouble seeing. As scary as they can be in the worst cases, schools (and politicians

for that matter) are actually a seemingly bottomless goldmine for comedy, as each new slate of teen movies or Saturday Night Live skits shows. A quick look back at Henri Bergson's (1911) *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* reminds us that today's schools are a perfect example of what Bergson says is at the root of most things we find funny: "mechanical inelasticity" (p. 15). So many of the things we laugh at, says Bergson, come down to people acting like machines "just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being" (p. 15). Is there any better summary of a normal school day, with its bells and herded students, tardy and discipline policies, "excused" and "unexcused" absences, "no tolerance" attitudes, and numbers locked up neatly in their boxes?

When a man trips and falls on an obstacle he should have seen and avoided, it is funny because "the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case called for something else" (p. 14). When we teach every subject the same way to everyone according to the same schedule in preparation for the same test despite the fact that we all know our students are not the same and do not want the same things, we are not much different; and when we trip and fall, people *do* laugh. Unfortunately, though, we are also asked daily in our current educational climate to take a new run at that obstacle, pretending again that we do not see it. This we too often call *standardization*, when it is really a kind of "mechanical inelasticity" that quickly turns to farce. Agreeing on a skill set that will adequately prepare our students to have the kinds of lives they want is one thing; it is quite another to act like we are mechanics on an assembly line, churning out a new model of compliant, submissive-but-economically-productive, group-thinking American consumer each year by adjusting this reading



comprehension bolt here and tightening that quadratic equation knob there. It is no wonder people outside the school environment do not take teachers seriously. Though few teachers seem inclined to laugh about the way our contemporary public education system has asked us to become increasingly machine- or puppet-like, many of us at least understand why we are currently being laughed at. We go into our classrooms every morning all too aware that we are becoming Bergson's "dancing-jack" (1911, p. 73), hoping it seems that we are "speaking and acting freely," while we know that we are often "a mere toy in the hands of another" who is pulling the strings. And when the students see our strings, there are few ways to convince them that we are not ridiculous.

Even our "content areas," those hallowed subjects full of untouchable legends with nothing but brilliant ideas, are often fertile ground for comedy. For example, I have a poster of Shakespeare in my room for purely comedic reasons. This particular poster is a caricature, and Shakespeare has an *enormous* head, which he might in fact have, figuratively, if he knew how we treated his work today. Our great thinkers are usually so distant, so unlike us (or so the story goes) that they do not seem real, locked firmly in the grasp of "mechanical inelasticity" that our reverence and approach have given them. And the "rules" and ideas they have developed become laughable, too, if we pretend that they are infallible or all-encompassing. American grammar is a perfect example, and one which Miami Herald writer Dave Barry has mined for numerous columns under the "Ask Mister Language Person" title; there are often more exceptions than there are examples that conform to any specific rule, and most people cannot make heads or tails of the particulars of things like the subjunctive mood, or gerund phrases. And sentence diagramming is not even a good joke. However, even though most of us recognize that

the “general idea” of grammar is often good enough, we still go on pretending that the sentence I am now writing would make a nice, neat, scientifically-rendered diagram that would somehow unlock the mysteries of written communication—what does one do with the dash, for example? Does anyone remember?

More attention to aesthetics, however, and more *revision* of their role in the curriculum, might just teach us how to laugh in health before our health becomes too laughable. To Bergson, comedy and aesthetics are related more closely than one might imagine at first; as he says, “in every wit there is something of a poet,” and in fact “any poet may reveal himself as a wit when he pleases” (1911, p. 98). Poets are poets in both “feeling” and “intelligence” (p. 99), and to become a wit, a poet need only turn off his feelings a little. Also, since the object of art is to remove “everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself” (p. 141), and some of the best comedy does much the same thing, perhaps public education curriculum could use a little of both the wit and the poet. For example, while many a student or parent involved in the arts has complained at one time or another about the bias given to sports in high schools, noticing quite rightly that no stadiums are built to hear poetry readings, perhaps it takes a wit, whose feelings can be left out of the discussion, to see what neither the pure athlete or aesthete can: that the two actually have a lot in common. Maybe a wit could see that this is another funny thing about schools, that the football coach and the dance choreographer have a Berlin Wall of disrespect between them that is largely an illusion; that maybe a uniform and location change turns sublime rhetoric into a halftime speech, and art critique into play-by-play commentary.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht certainly sees through this illusory wall in his work *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006), written out of “determination to see and to value athletic beauty as an embodiment of a culture’s highest values” (p. 24). And though the objections to such a statement from both aesthetes and athletes are easy enough to imagine, I have to confess how much sense it makes to me, as an athlete and an aesthete. I am a museum member and writer married to an artist, and also a season ticket holder for the University of Georgia’s football team; the arts and athletics have always been important parts of my life simultaneously, and Gumbrecht seems to understand why. Many a Saturday in the fall I have seen, and felt, and been moved by, the beauty and grace and power of a well-designed and executed pass play, for example, and I agree with Gumbrecht’s summary of such an event: it is not all facepaint and machismo, but rather contains a large portion of the kind of rare experience that brings together “massive numbers of ordinary people, along with a handful of multimillionaires, sharing aesthetic experience” (p. 39). And when we go home and watch endless replays (*revisions?*) of the same athletic feats, it is for the beauty, the “epiphany” of “the unexpected appearance of a body in space, suddenly taking on a beautiful form that just as quickly and irreversibly dissolves” (p. 54)—no matter how reluctant we might be to express it that way. Why else would we watch the play again and again?

So dare we hope for a *revised* school environment in which the athlete, artist, and wit can all enjoy an aesthetic curricular experience? I am lucky enough to see, every now and then, a glimpse of such a thing at my high school: we have for the last few years held an elementary-school-style field day for our seniors. Even though it is just one day, I will likely never forget the image, for example, of two of my AP students—one of our

school's top historians and that year's Poet Laureate—proudly decked out in their “Byronic Beasts” team t-shirts (the back reads “mad, bad, and dangerous to know”) and winning the water balloon toss, or the picture of a valedictory front-runner falling just short in the hula hoop competition. My high-strung, “results” obsessed, almost-cutthroat competitive students are for a few hours happy, and carefree, and nice to each other, and part of the larger community and pageantry of colorfully-attired students merrily screaming for the tricycle champion, the greatest pie-eater, and the glory of tug-of-war. It is athletic, it is hilarious, and it is beautiful, and I have not been happier to be a teacher than I am on those days.

### Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

*“Spirit of Beauty, that dost consecrate  
With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon  
Of human thought or form,—where art thou gone?”*

(Percy Shelley, 1819/1977)

If we did want to go about making school more “aesthetically pleasing,” we would certainly need to support the arts programs we have, *and* help those programs grow, *and* allow those arts to spread beyond the confines of art class so that they permeated all of our content areas. But that is not all; if we wanted beautiful schools (and a beautiful curriculum), we would also need to *revise* the physical school as well, to let those arts permeate our campuses. We would need murals, exhibitions, performances, recitals, and readings as part of our teachers’ and students’ everyday experiences, as much a part of our natural environments as it would take to balance out the cinder block and marker board jungle, that blank-white-canvas nothingness that stretches around the frames of our buildings. It is hard to teach “life-long learning” in a place in which no one would want to live.

For example, the school where I work is ugly. I do not mean that it is a “bad” school, but rather that it physically “needs improvement,” to steal, unapologetically, a term too often applied to schools in a way that carries little direct meaning and seems mostly to be used as a threat, as in “bring your scores up or you’re all out of a job.” My school is not one of “those” schools; in fact, it is a *very good* school, in just about every way people measure schools these days. We get *very good* scores in just about every subject for which there is a standardized test to tell us these things, we have a reputation around the state for being a *very good* place from which to apply to a college, and just in case we forget, the state sometimes sends around a list of *very good* schools to remind us, even calling us a “School of *Excellence*” three times in the last twenty years (or every time we were eligible).

I mean that despite the lists and numbers and deserved reputation, the place itself—the grounds, the structure, the traffic patterns, the design, the atmosphere, the smells, the sounds, the feel—is not “aesthetically pleasing.” It does not look like the kind of place I want to work, teaching or learning, and the feeling does not change much upon entering the building, right down to the yellow lockers against a cream-colored wall with a maroon stripe at the top, broken up by blonde-wooden doors with gray trim. But then, I am sure the school was not built to be pretty—maybe efficient, or orderly, or cheap, but not pretty. Standing in the parking lot in the morning before I go in, I am sure that the locks work, that the attendance and grading systems (generally) work, that it will hum along like the well-oiled machine that it is. I am sure that the school day will run as well and smoothly as possible; I am not sure that I want to be a part of it.

Apparently, though, beauty is not always easy to find anywhere else, either, or at least to keep. For example, Percy Shelley's 1819 "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" is exactly what it sounds like, except maybe for the slight air of dread or even desperation, like a lover so dedicated and so smitten that he begs for a merciful visit from his beloved. This is no new territory for the aesthete Shelley, as many of his best known works deal with the inconstancy of beautiful inspiration, which he swears is "dearer for its mystery" (1819/1977, line 12). "Ozymandias" (1818/1977) tells the story of a now-ruined monument to a king whose kingdom has passed into the desert sand, *Adonais* (1839/1977) is an elegy for the departed poet John Keats, and "Ode to the West Wind" (1820/1977) is a plea for the spring that Shelley fears will not follow his approaching winter. In all cases, what is sought—lasting, powerful beauty—is the prize Shelley seeks most, despite his failure to keep and hold it wherever he thinks he has found it. But "Hymn" is perhaps the most direct of these works; not only does he address his love, but the words "inconstant" and "unseen" appear twice in the first stanza, in which he also says the experience of "Intellectual Beauty" is "like memory of music fled" (line 10). As early as the second stanza's sad inquiry "Why dost thou pass away and leave our state, / This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?" (lines 16-17), it is clear why he calls the "unseen Power" of the first line "O awful Loveliness" (line 71) by the end of the poem.

Keats, fellow lover of beauty and author of the famous, and famously enigmatic, lines "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (lines 49-50) in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820/1990), also knew the elusive nature of beauty all too well, although to Keats beauty is elusive for different reasons.

His “Ode” may as well be an ode to ambivalence, as he never seems sure himself how he feels about the beauty he loves, in this case represented by the images on an ancient urn. His “bride” is always a “bride of quietness” who is frozen and unreachable, and therefore will forever stay “unravish’d” (line 1). It seems that for Keats, beauty is not “awful” because it is fleeting like it is for Shelley; rather, beauty is timeless and static, and it is we who are fleeting. Given our mortality, then, we are left to choose between the pain and ecstasy of the live experience of love or the “Cold Pastoral” (line 45) that the urn represents, where lovers and spring “cannot fade” (line 19) but also cannot live, “Though winning near the goal” (line 18). It seems that in a world where “Beauty is truth,” we must choose between dying and not living.

Whether Shelley or Keats has the better understanding of beauty, either way it seems pretty dangerous, even to those who have devoted their lives to studying it. And perhaps this is why the builders of my school and so many others have eschewed the issue altogether; after all, pretty schools do not necessarily lead to pretty numbers and definitely cost pretty pennies, and plenty of schools, like mine, seem to be humming along just fine without beauty. Some of our greatest thinkers, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1758/1960) in *Politics and the Arts: Letter to D’alembert on the Theatre*, have supported this idea, and even suggested that the study of beauty (aesthetics) is so dangerous that it should be avoided in many cases. Rousseau says that the theater can be seen as a “useless amusement” (p. 16), which is “an evil for a being whose life is so short and whose time is so precious.” He further argues that in any case, art cannot produce a love of “the beauty of virtue” (p. 23)—note that it is not the “virtue of beauty”—that is not already within us, and so we do not need it. Even worse, the arts have the potential to

“accustom the eyes of the people to horrors that they ought not even to know” (p. 33), and so harm that love of virtue already within us. As for the young, we ought to teach them to “distrust the illusions” (p. 56) of which the arts consist, and we ought to also beware the likely “slackening of work” (p. 62) and the degeneration of character in the general populace if they are increasingly exposed to the arts and artists (actors in particular). It seems that aesthetics, to Rousseau, is not only an unproductive influence, but also possibly morally damaging.

However, Rousseau, it should be mentioned, also says that all comedy is “bad and pernicious,” and that the “very pleasure of the comic is founded on a vice of the human heart” (p. 34), and complains that the decent people in comedies are either victims or boring. In short, he sounds like the kind of guy who would likely be the victim in a comedy. He also talks a lot about the theater and the arts for a guy who says we do not really need them; I guess he needed to experience enough of them to be sure. And anyway, there are perhaps just as many great thinkers like Friedrich Schiller, who writes in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795/1954) about just how important the inclusion of aesthetics is if we want to live well. In fact, he says early on that we should all “follow the path of aesthetics, since it is through Beauty that we arrive at Freedom” (p. 27).

Perhaps we need Beauty for Freedom because our society has become structured over the centuries in such a way that “Man himself grew to be only a fragment” that lacks “the harmony of his being” and eventually “becomes merely the imprint of his occupation, of his science” (p. 40). Though a man as interested in serious productivity as Rousseau would likely see little problem with this situation, Schiller disagrees, arguing that in this way of living “humanity has lost its dignity, but Art has rescued and preserved



it in significant stone” (p. 52). Ultimately, Schiller argues that mankind needs a balanced life, and says that such wholeness needs productivity and seriousness balanced with play, and that he can “play *only with Beauty*” (p. 80, his italics). In fact, aesthetics is so important to mankind that he is not himself without it; “*he is only wholly Man when he is playing*” (p. 80, his italics). And hence, true freedom is inextricable from aesthetics, since the “aesthetic creative impulse” is something that “releases mankind from all the shackles of circumstance and frees him from everything that may be called a constraint, whether physical or moral” (p. 137). All things considered, Schiller’s argument carries more weight than Rousseau’s; searching after beauty may be dangerous to some degree, but that is also true of *learning*, which exposes us to things we want to see and things we do not, as well as lives we would like to emulate and those we would not. And if Schiller is right, and the end of the “path of aesthetics” is freedom and wholeness, it seems well worth the risk. Perhaps we should even spruce up our school buildings a bit beyond “efficient,” and design our new ones so that they are both academically and aesthetically pleasing.

### Digging

*“Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I’ll dig with it.”*

(Seamus Heaney, “Digging”)

Seamus Heaney’s poem (1966/1998) can be a painful one for young people to read, but especially for young men, who too easily see themselves in the poem’s narrator, watching presumably from an upstairs window while the father he knows he can never be but must try to be works expertly and impressively outside and below, doing “man’s work.” This image from Heaney hits me right between the eyes and causes a tightening

in my chest even now, because every time I read this poem I am transported immediately back to my teenage bedroom, from which I awoke countless weekend mornings to the sound of my father doing the work he did not even ask for my help to complete. I am not Irish, nor does my family farm potatoes or anything else, but I hear my own voice when Heaney's narrator describes in sharp detail the "clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground" (lines 3-4), with the clear, bittersweet pride of a son who wonders if he will be able to do his father's work one day; I have also felt, figuratively, at least, that "I've no spade to follow men like them" (line 28). His bragging that "My grandfather cut more turf in a day / Than any other man on Toner's bog" (lines 17-18) is my bragging about my own patriarchs as well, even though I hardly understand what he is bragging about. And when the young man of this poem finds resolution in his pen, and confidently claims "I'll dig with it"—well, his resolution is mine, too.

It is simply hard to find one's place in the world, to join a great family lineage or to leave it, to choose a trodden path or to forge a new one. And this is true for everyone, even our greatest artists and thinkers. Harold Bloom argues in *A Map of Misreading* (1975/2003) that great poets are not any more free of their ancestors than the rest of us; not only is a poem "a response to a poem, as a poet is a response to a poet, or a person to his parent" (p. 18), but Bloom also says that the "poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father" (p. 19). He further states that "you cannot write or teach or think or even read without imitation" (p. 32), and Heaney's poem seems to be evidence of this. The good news, though, is that a curriculum full of aesthetics can help us find a place for ourselves in these traditions, can help us even contribute a little or put our own stamp on what has gone before. Art can

help us “*misinterpret* the father”—*revise* him, and us. Art can help us *dig*, as Heaney’s “Digging” helped (helps) me.

Wilde and the other aesthetes have continually insisted that art is *useless*, or not to be used as a tool, but that does not mean that nothing happens when we experience it. We see beauty, and ourselves, more clearly in aesthetic experience; from the artist’s *vision* we experience *revision*, and maybe a more beauty-full life, whatever that might mean to each of us. Before the statisticians and spreadsheet masters that drive education today begin to salivate, though, we should all take heed of Jacob Bronowski’s warning in *The Visionary Eye* (1978) that we will not find our proof, our “results” of the educational experience, in art. As he puts it, “it is no use going to the real works of art and the real works of literature, because they start exactly where the statistics leave off, exactly where three times the standard deviation peters out” (p. 135). What we will find instead is that “the work of art is essentially an unfinished statement” that causes us to “make [our] own generalization” (p. 126). To use the case of poetry as an explanation of this property of art, Bronowski says “when you read a poem you all see the same words, and yet each of you makes the poem something different and personal for himself” (p. 12), in much the same way that I see my father, who is not a potato farmer, when I read Heaney’s poem. In doing this, we “recreate the poem, because there is a moment in which it speaks our inner language” (p. 120). This manipulation of an artist’s work, this “recreation,” this *revision* of a poem, is “the foundation of art” (p. 12). In other words, when we experience art, we look into the world through another’s eyes and find ourselves there, too. This gift of someone else’s eyes makes our own vision clearer. What better gift can we offer our students?

Perhaps the reason art can do this for us is precisely the reason our current educational leaders might use to cut it out of schools altogether; its power often runs contrary to our leaders' (misguided) educational desires, revealing as beautifully complex the world they want to simplify and commodify. Rather than make Benoit Mandelbrot's work (1983) mandatory, we choose fractions over fractals, and digits over *digging*. As Derrida says, though, we need both "*arche* and an-archy," or "reason *and* what is beyond the principle of reason" in order to truly be "'thinking'" (2004, p. 153). To take literature as an example, Peggy Kamuf says that "a fiction refers to nothing that exists. It refers, but to nothing in existence" (2005, p. 139). This means that fiction, to use her terminology, is "suspended" between *is* and *is not*, which makes it "the possibility of world, of possible, virtual, fictional worlds, of other worlds" (p. 144). In other words, the property of art that many call its weakness—its dynamic instability, its complexity, its *uselessness* as a referent, its resistance to being divided into "standards," its refusal to be "account-able" in a time of "accountability"—is actually a strength, and Kamuf says that in fact it has the power and right "to say everything," "to say anything at all" (p. 181). Martin Heidegger also testifies to art's power in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971), saying that art acts as a "deconcealing" force in the world, or "opens up in its own way the Being of beings" (p. 38). He even states later that all art is "*essentially poetry*" (p. 70, his italics), and that it is through poetry that we live, that we find a home, a place: "poetry is what really lets us dwell" (p. 213).

So where do our students want to "dwell"? In boxes on spreadsheets, or in poetry? Is there room for both in their curriculum? We could, and should, ask them, but I am not sure they even know. And, really, it is hard to blame them, since they have been

exposed more and more in their most formative years to only one of these options, so much so that they can scarcely imagine that “education” could mean anything else. The hardest pop quiz I give all year in AP Literature has one question: “Why did you come to class today?” Being *very good* students, who care very much about getting “right” answers, they are stumped, and grow more hesitant as the minutes pass. Filing unsatisfied through attendance rules, parental pressure, social expectations, career aspirations, and college admission, they eventually see that I am not going to tell them the answer. What I am going to do instead, I tell them, is offer them an opportunity to figure that out, to *dig*, to “play,” to “disconceal,” to study a thing like poetry, “liberatory at its core” (Rich, 2001, p. 116). I always hope that they will see what Bronowski does and NCLB does not, that “every work of art is an experiment in living” (1978, p. 143). I always hope that they will *live*.

*Chapter 7*

***Living Beyond: St. Paul, Romanticism, and the Doors of Artistic***

**Perception**

*“Most men and women lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so monotonous, poor and limited that the urge to escape, the longing to transcend themselves if only for a few moments, is and has always been one of the principal appetites of the soul.”*

(Aldous Huxley, 1954/2004, p. 62)

*“Reality isn’t enough anymore.”*

(student sentiment overheard by Ihde, 2002, p. xiii)

*“fitter happier more productive . . .  
no longer afraid of the dark”*

(Radiohead, “fitter happier,” 1997)

This chapter focuses, at least in a certain way, on the works and lives of the six most famous British Romantic poets—which, let’s just go ahead and admit, is a pretty English-teachery thing to do. By that I mean that the mere mention of these guys in a classroom causes students’ eyes to glaze a little, as if they are sure that what is about to happen will probably include lots of stuffy, serious talking about super-serious poems that include plenty of pretentious exclamation points and, likely, lots of talk about things blooming. Take “Percy Bysshe Shelley” for example; it almost sounds like his parents were trying to get him beat up with that name (at least we would wonder that today), and I’m going to spend a whole chapter arguing that he is still actually important and valuable to teenagers and today’s curriculum?

So, let's not just dive right in, and instead talk about cars and backpacks. My parents were nice enough, in one of those "after this last big present you will be buying everything else for yourself" gestures, to give me a 1993 Ford Explorer just before I finished my bachelor's degree. I loved that SUV, and it was nicer than anything I could have expected, for a good long time. I drove it for ten years, though, and was really happy to let it go at the end. On the one hand, it was paid for, truck-sturdy enough to do some auto-heavy lifting, and I always loved the look and feel of it, even if it was eventually in a favorite-old-shirt kind of way. On the other hand, it grew increasingly untrustworthy, and showed a troubling tendency to break down at really bad times—at night, packed full of boxes while I was moving; on the way to a swanky party in Atlanta (I'm not exactly on those guest lists often); in the school parking lot after work, complete with sputtering, plumes of black smoke, and the kind of noises you didn't think cars made. For years, I restricted it to local driving and obsessed over any little misbehavior when I did drive it, and I finally fixed it up and sold it cheap to somebody whose lifestyle it fit better. I now drive a brand new, shiny, slightly smaller SUV with a reputation for reliability and good gas mileage.

I also have a blue Jansport backpack that I bought right before I left home for college, which means it is roughly the same age as that Explorer. However, despite some color fading, it looks just about like it did when I bought it, and works every bit as well. Over the years it has managed to hold William Blake and Willie Nelson, beach magazines and master's thesis materials, Faulkner and Frisbees and floppy disks and flash drives. When the zipper breaks or a hole tears through or a strap wears, Jansport fixes it up and sends it back. It does not need to be replaced with a new model; it just

needs a little maintenance now and then. In short, time seems to be of no concern to the backpack; it was just as good yesterday as today, high school through doctoral program and beyond, and I will be really surprised if it is not just as good in the future.

The 1993 Ford Explorer and the Jansport backpack actually provide a nice little metaphor for the English Class Problem, and a problem for the curriculum in general: time passes. What should we do about time passing? My students, in general, tend to think they like new stuff, and I like old stuff; they think I don't get it, and I think they don't get it. The obvious truth that we all need to remember, though, inside the classroom and outside it, is that things are neither good nor bad simply because they are old or new. The whole curricular key, it seems, when it comes to old texts (especially literature) is to look at them and be able to tell between the Explorer and the backpack, so to speak; this is the work of *revision*. When we *revise*, or *look again*, we will likely find that some things fit our lives today so poorly that we are forced to consider which—the text or our contemporary interests and lifestyles—needs to be changed. But something has to give, and in many cases it is the text, no matter how powerful our nostalgic attachment to our 1993 Ford Explorers of the academic world. In other cases, those old texts are just as relevant today as when they were written, and every now and then we even find old texts that seem to be written *for* today; we just need to *revise* them in our new context, and maybe patch a hole or two.

This, believe it or not, is the case I would (will) make for those Romantic poets.

\* \* \*

We are all of us, everywhere, always *living beyond*, or trying to. We are forever looking for something more, or at least something else, striving always to see, or feel, or



live *beyond* ourselves, our lives, our *now*, even if we disagree about how to go about it. Whether we dream, write, watch, smoke, swallow, paint, or pray to the thing that we hope will take us there, our goal is the same: profound improvement of the human condition—or at least *our* human condition, even if it is just for a little while. We have always sought it, and always will; we are, at heart, Romantics, “longing to transcend” (Huxley, 1954/2004, p. 62). In fact, we develop new ways to *live beyond* all the time, taking the words of those nineteenth-century British poets and writing them anew on our communities, our bodies, and our souls.

Though it sounds like the stuff of science fiction, or mysticism, it is not only those things; interest in *living beyond* is also nearly everywhere we look. In public education, for example, an interest in *living beyond* is present in almost everything we do, and everything we urge our students to do, even if few of us would think to call our curriculum “Romantic” these days. In fact, deep down, it is why many of us are in the building at all. We are constantly asking our students, no matter the content area, to grow, and mature, and develop, both personally and academically. Even if the structure we often give our studies is largely artificial and inappropriately linear, it is no accident that we call them *progress* reports, or that we talk of *passing* in each class. If you do not *pass*—*live beyond, learn beyond*—you *fail*. If you *fail*, you must try to *pass* again, or you must abandon the attempt to follow at least the officially-sanctioned course of study in that field altogether. This is no liberal, social reconstructionist slant on learning; even the most conservative educators know that learning means *living beyond*, which is perhaps why they are lately trying so hard to control the process, to make it as linear and

rigid as possible, to standardize it as much as they can (*live beyond* this way, according to this schedule and to this extent).

Every part of our culture, though, is touched to some degree by our desire to *live beyond*—even popular music. When Radiohead released the landmark album *OK Computer* in 1997, the band’s troubling, searching, and sometimes critical examination of mankind swimming in an ocean of new technology, not only was Second Life not born yet, but the “information superhighway” was also mostly dirt roads with a few fancy tourist stops spread few and far between. The album is a collection of disjointed images, whispered fears, and screamed objections concerning our relationships with our new technologies, and how they might affect our relationships with each other—how we might *live beyond* with our machines. The world of *OK Computer* is populated with “Paranoid Androids,” “Subterranean Homesick Aliens,” and the “Karma Police,” and while its lyrics are often abstract and sound as confused as the world they describe, the tone of the work is unmistakable, and is often made clear by the clashing of old and new sounds in unexpected and quickly shifting ways. When Radiohead looks at how we might *live beyond* through our machines, it is decidedly uneasy, and this general feeling is perhaps mostly sharply expressed in “fitter happier,” the track (“song” is not exactly the right word) that is nestled into the middle of the album. The lyrics read like a rough-draft list for a bargain-aisle self-improvement book, at least at first:

Fitter happier more productive  
 Comfortable  
 Not drinking too much  
 Regular exercise at the gym (3 days a week)  
 Getting on better with your associate employee contemporaries (1997, lines 1-5)

Soon, though, the list is invaded by frailties and fears of being “teenage and desperate” (line 23) or “empty and frantic” (line 37) before the list ends by repeating the first line and following it with “a pig / in a cage / on antibiotics” (lines 44-46). But it is the *sound* of the track that is most affecting; rather than sung with Radiohead’s trademark electric-guitar-storm propelling the vocal, the list is read by a pseudo-human computer voice that misses all of the natural emphasis and is just creepy enough to keep small children up at night. In short, concerning our relationship with technology, Radiohead seems to argue much the same thing I am arguing about our curricular relationship with literature: the need for *revision*. As the track seems to ask, if we do manage to *live beyond* ourselves with the help of our computers, what will we be? What do we want to be?

This interest in *living beyond* is certainly nothing new, though, or necessarily connected with technology at all, and it has often been a dream rather than a nightmare. In fact, it is at least as old as the Bible, and the people who pursue it are usually hopeful for a spiritually and emotionally fulfilling happy ending. One of the most famous and popular of the Bible’s many stories of *living beyond*—or *conversion* (sinner to saved, or saint), as it is usually called in this case—is Saul of Tarsus, better known as St. Paul. While it was customary in Saul/Paul’s day to have two names, one Hebrew and one Roman (1995, p. 1673), writers in the New Testament call him Saul before his conversion, and mostly Paul afterward. In fact, the transition takes place, with nowhere near the *bang* of the popular telling of this tale, in Acts 13:9. The writer here, presumably Luke, makes mention of “Saul, who was also called Paul” (p. 1673), and that is it. From this verse on, he is Paul, and Paul only.

While experts speculate that this change signals the beginning of the Gentile ministry that would dominate the rest of his life, to the layman, the need for this change (*revision?*) is pretty obvious: Paul is a minister to Christians, and Saul is a persecutor of them. In fact, when we meet young Saul he is present and approving at the stoning of the apostle Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:1), and is actively pursuing Christians throughout his neck of the Roman Empire with the help of powerful friends (Acts 9:1-2). But on one of his journeys, Saul has his famous “Damascus Road” experience, being literally “blinded by the light” as well as scolded and converted to Christianity by the booming, heavenly voice of Christ himself. When he is healed from his blindness three days later, he is on his way to being a different man, and apparently when he is ready, he becomes Paul. There are few better examples of *living beyond*, though no doubt some version of the “Damascus Road” story is being told by countless recalcitrant sinners as I write this. The big difference is that while most of us who tell these tales make some kind of significant life change, Saul actually becomes someone else. He is not only converted to the way that will lead him to eternal life after death, but he also gets to *live beyond* while he is still on Earth, as Paul, missionary to the Gentiles, and a third time as Paul, easily the most prominent writer in the New Testament and therefore the foundation of much of Christian theology. Saul manages to *live beyond* so completely that he needs a new name.

Saul/Paul’s story is one the Romantics must have loved, whether or not they loved his doctrines (there is plenty of biographical evidence that they did not). It carries so many of the hallmarks of their work, including the supernatural, the visionary experience, the inspiration, the bold independence, and the transcendence of the world through inner transformation. Paul’s story is personal, powerful, and populist; he is a man “touched”

with wisdom that cannot be learned, who sees with eyes that others do not have. He sees for them, and leads them, like godly version of a William Blake who people listen to, or a William Wordsworth who never settles into conservative respectability. He is, in some ways, a man not just of *vision*, but of *revision*, more Romantic than the Romantics.

When I say that Saul/Paul's story is Romantic, or that we are all Romantic at heart, of course I do not mean that we all can secretly quote Wordsworth's (1850/1996) *Prelude*, or even that many of us have read it. I mean instead that what is shared by the heterogeneous minds of the "big six" Romantic poets (Blake, Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats) is what is shared by all minds on some level: an interest in *living beyond*. I mean that in this case, a literary movement in Britain that lasted less than half a century at best managed to pluck the strings of the human condition in a way that still resonates today, and finds its way into the songs sung in realms as disparate as religion, video games, the genome project, popular literature, the drug subculture, reality television, and modern art.

Perhaps, upon *revising* their work, we will find that the Romantic poets still have much to tell us, and deserve an important place in our curriculum, despite their stuffy names and literary reputations. For example, Noel Gough (2002) finds that the work of a poet like Blake is pretty timeless, since it offers a "critical vision" that is "not only about hopes for the future but also about seeing the world otherwise *now*" (p. 4, his italics)—a *vision* that offers hope for endless *revision*. M. E. M. Moore (2002) agrees, and adds that artists like Blake "represent new possibilities for the artistic work of curriculum theorizing" (pp. 225-226). Michael S. Littleford (1982/1999) also notices that "Blake's visionary prophecies still ring out to us today with surprising relevance," and his work

“can provide inspiration, insight, and tools to confront and transcend” (p. 117). Blake and the other Romantics, it seems, have not only *lived beyond* themselves and that short, bright literary burst in the early 1800’s, but they can also still teach us how to *live beyond* today. After all, William E. Doll, Jr. (1993) says that “curriculum is a process—not of transmitting what is (absolutely) known but of exploring what is unknown” (p. 155); the Romantics might be just the kind of guides we need to develop such a curriculum. With *revision*, we might find that the lives and works of these poets can act much like Benoit Mandelbrot’s (1983) iterative equations; we can run our own time and place through them and see the complexity of our world in new ways.

### **Living Beyond our Societies**

Though they are renowned today for their individualism, many of the Romantics actually began as revolutionaries, at least in spirit. As we are told in *British Literature 1780-1830*, the valuable, comprehensive text from Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlak (1996), William Blake was an advocate for the working class (p. 272), Percy Shelley took up the cause of atheists in college (p. 1050), William Wordsworth was actually in France for part of the Revolution (p. 560), and Lord Byron’s first speech in the House of Lords defended frame-breakers, while his second championed the rights of Irish Catholics (p. 881). Byron’s revolutionary spirit even returned later in his life, despite his stunted political career, and he died a war hero of sorts, leading the Greeks against Turkish forces in 1824 (p. 884).

As for Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he and his friend Robert Southey even planned “an emigration to America, where they would found an egalitarian utopia on Pennsylvania’s Susquehanna River” that they planned to call “Pantisocracy” (p. 680).

Southey was the first to lose interest, and the plans eventually fell through, but the story still illustrates an important aspect of social utopias—their failure to materialize as designed. This is perhaps at least part of the reason Coleridge and the rest of the Romantics soon moved on to more individual pursuits of *living beyond*, or at least traveled on their quest for transcendence in smaller groups. As Fredrich Jameson shows us in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2007), while utopian designs can be great motivators, challengers of terribly flawed systems, and blueprints for heavens of equality and harmony, the civilizations they describe are always just out of reach, and always will be. Even Coleridge’s chosen setting for his utopian dreams, America, is not now, nor ever has been, the place it insists it has to be—but in both his vision of America as utopia and also his abandonment of that vision, there are lessons to be learned still today. It is a place full of promises of equality, prosperity, and liberty, but the realization of those promises for all of the people who live there are forever on the way. It is truly an “American Dream.”

Designing a social utopia, as the framers of the United States seemed to be attempting at times, is an endeavor fraught with perils, aside from the stumbling blocks of impracticality and tradition, and many of these are unavoidable. For one, as Jameson points out, there is always a “tension between expression and construction” (2007, p. 43); no matter how dire and widely abhorred the social injustice being corrected, a utopian design is always created by *someone*, and that designer cannot entirely remove his subjective fingerprints from his creation. This obviously runs into a one-utopia-fits-all dilemma, in which we can adopt *my* utopia or *yours*, but not one in which we are both perfectly satisfied. Also, as we have seen in countless utopian texts over the years, the

grand solution that is the utopia is “always conceived as a situation-specific resolution of a concrete historical dilemma” (p. 145), good at finding (imagined) answers to today’s problems, but not so good at answering *all* problems, especially those we do not know about yet (immigration, for example?). Moreover, the utopia is simultaneously inspired by history and insistent on giving “the appearance of being ahistorical” (p. 37), as if time could stop, once and for all, *revised* once and for good, and all the struggles of man could be put to rest in a land of everlasting, universal bliss.

And even if we could halt the charge of history and completely divorce ourselves from the past, likely the burden of “divine creation” (p. 101) would still be too great; the utopian visionary “is obliged to invent an entire universe, an entire ontology, another world altogether,” whole and complete and self-sufficient—and there are just too many details for which the creator must account if he wants such a world to leave the pages of fiction. One of the Romantics, Blake, attempted something akin to this, though he elected to *revise* history rather than write it off. Blake’s mythological *re-vision* of the history of God and man is astonishing in its breadth and artistry, and perhaps no man has seen the world so clearly and completely through his own eyes. However, ultimately it is *Blake’s vision*, not ours, and even hours spent with his work leave us with the impression that Blake may have indeed created his own world, but he was the only man to live in it. And though the other Romantics stopped short of re-imagining the universe, they all eventually opted for individual transcendence over social reconstruction, and spent their creative and poetic energies urging us to do the same. Perhaps this is a lesson for all of our standardized, one-size-fits-all approaches to public education curriculum as well. We



do all have an interest in *living beyond*, but we do not all do so in exactly the same way—and we likely couldn't even if we wanted to.

### **Living Beyond our Words**

In attempting to become recognized as the prophets that would lead the rest of us in the ways of *living beyond*, the Romantic poets took a variety of paths. Blake became a recluse who spoke to angels and other unseen creatures (Mellor & Matlak, 1996, p. 273), Wordsworth and Coleridge moved to the Lake District and wandered the woods (p. 561), Keats mused on a tubercular “posthumous existence” between life and death (p. 1256), and Byron and Shelley became two of the world's most famous exiles, scandalously wandering Europe while the gossips buzzed at home (p. 882). Each of them, though, became a man who could not simply be called a “writer,” or even a “poet.” For instance, many men wrote poems in those days, and good ones, but only a Percy Shelley would insist that poets were “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (1840/1977, p. 508).

Of the six, perhaps Wordsworth and Shelley were most adept at using their words to do much more than *say* things, in the traditional sense, and offer the richest texts for studies of how we do the same kinds of things today. Both men seemed to know that if they were clever enough, they could use their words in order to transcend them, like a springboard into history and legend rather than the mere beautiful expression of thoughts. The older Wordsworth was the first of the two to make such a move with his 1807 tribute to English literary giant John Milton in “London, 1802” (Mellor & Matlak, 1996, p. 599). In this poem, Wordsworth cries out “Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour: / England hath need of thee” (lines 1-2). He then offers a list of all of the things his England currently lacks, and by lines nine through eleven, in which Milton is described

as having a soul which was “like a Star and dwelt apart” and a voice as “Pure as the naked heavens,” Wordsworth makes it clear that what England needs is a leader.

Wordsworth's sonnet is certainly praise for Milton from beginning to end, but this is not all that the words accomplish. Though the entire work is addressed to Milton, Wordsworth still makes the legendary poet secondary in this sonnet before he begins the first line; the title of this work is noticeably not “To Milton” or something of the sort, but rather “London, 1802.” This fact reminds the reader that as much as this poem is about Milton and former glory, it is more about the present and establishing glory in the future. After all, since Milton has been dead over a hundred years and clearly cannot return, who better to take Milton’s literary throne of public influence than the man who understands so well why Milton is needed in the first place? Wordsworth answers this question without a single self-referential remark, and by celebrating Milton, celebrates himself—in much the same way prominent, media-savvy politicians today pepper their speeches with eloquent tributes to their popular, elder (often deceased) statesmen. In “London, 1802,” Wordsworth quite cleverly calls for a lost literary king and becomes a prince; he manages to be both a voice in the crowd and the authority who answers, a man who looks for a leader and finds himself. In asking Milton to *live beyond* the grave, he manages to *live beyond* “William Wordsworth, poet.”

Percy Shelley joined this lineage himself in 1816 with “To Wordsworth” (1816/1977), but he shows in his sonnet that while Wordsworth was content to be Milton’s heir, Shelley would much rather be Wordsworth's usurper. This sonnet was only published nine years after “London, 1802,” but Shelley could not wait; if Wordsworth would not *actually* die, Shelley decided he would pronounce him dead

creatively, which to a poet he hoped would be much the same thing. He says in the first lines that “thou hast wept to know / That things depart which never may return,” and Shelley makes it clear by the end of the sonnet that this time, Wordsworth’s poetic power and relevance will not be returning, either; apparently Wordsworth’s new conservative politics and place in the establishment have ruined him. Shelley summarizes Wordsworth’s crime for him in the last line as “Thus having been, that thou should cease to be,” writing an epitaph on the literary tombstone of a man who lived another thirty-four years—and also drawing up blueprints for contemporary American political challenger campaigns, not to mention hip-hop’s endless battle-rap, king-of-the-hill lyrical posturing.

Shelley knew exactly what Wordsworth meant by praising Milton in “London, 1802,” and he let his elder poet know as much by echoing his form and even some of his imagery with the star simile; while Milton’s “soul was like a Star and dwelt apart” (line 9) to Wordsworth, Shelley describes Wordsworth’s prime by saying “Thou wert as a lone star” (line 7). The poem’s final line also circles the reader back to the first line of Wordsworth’s link in the sonnet chain and gives it new meaning. Just as Milton should have been living in 1802, so should Wordsworth in 1816. By writing this sonnet and referring to “London, 1802,” Shelley does, in fact, secure for Wordsworth the place next to Milton that he coveted. However, this sonnet gives Wordsworth *historical* greatness, or past greatness that has since faded, not the leadership of England in the present or the future. Effectively, Shelley helps make Wordsworth king only to give himself a better route to the throne. In a variation of the question Wordsworth asked in the first sonnet, Shelley asks, who would be better suited to take the absent king’s place than the man

who not only understood what made the king great, but could also see the ways in which he fell short?

Aside from offering a short course in power politics, *re-vising* these works reminds us that this idea of a multi-dimensional, multi-purpose text that *lives beyond* words as we know them is becoming almost pervasive today, with the proliferation of technologies that have changed what we can mean by “text” and “literature” in ways that even Blake could not likely have envisioned. His own multi-dimensional art, which involved an ever-changing, continually *revised* interplay of words, color, and illustration, looks about 200 years ahead of its time now, and we can perhaps forgive his contemporaries for not really knowing what to do with it. However, even Blake’s offering of a myriad of audience experiences pales in comparison to what is offered by the average 21<sup>st</sup>-century film, and some reality television, I must admit, far outstrips it (well, at least in terms of *variety* of experience, if not always *substance*).

The roots of this transformation can be traced in large part to the photograph; just as the Romantics decided that poetry could be for and about anyone, the advent of photography meant that images were no longer the sole property of the painter. And over the years, as these new images could be more and more widely produced, and manipulated, it has become clear that we can truly *live beyond* words. In fact, we are now so inundated with visual images that we often treat them as if they have nothing to say, even though we hear it loud and clear (“buy this—it will make you happy!”; “be skinnier—it will make you happy!”). They are everywhere we turn, and there are so many that we cannot count them, let alone decide what they are worth; we often say that they are both “alive” and “dead” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 10), call them both “all-powerful” or

“worthless” (p. 77), and insist that they “float without any visible means of support, a phantasmatic, virtual, or spectral appearance” (p. 85). And before we can even get used to the visual flood, we now have images that want to *live beyond* images; as W. J. T. Mitchell says, in modern, abstract art we have “pictures that want not to be pictures, pictures that want to be liberated from image-making” (2005, p. 44).

*Re-vising* the Romantics and their place in the curriculum in this way also reminds us that their words were never *just* words, and gives those of us who teach words hope that we will be able to continue to teach words even in a seemingly image-saturated world. In fact, just like Wordsworth and Shelley’s words, we are surrounded today by things, not just people, that seem to want to *live beyond* what they always have been, and perhaps we should not fight it: as Mitchell points out, a “medium”—like words—“just is a ‘middle’,” something that connects this to that, “a sender to a receiver,” “an artist to a beholder,” or “this world to the next” (p. 204). And why do we feel like we have to “determine the boundaries of the medium” (p. 204)? Maybe we, too, can do what Wordsworth and Shelley did, and even more. Why not *revise* this idea of a “medium,” let it expand, to include as much *living beyond* as it can in the various exchanges between creator, medium, and audience? Henry Jenkins (2006) calls this kind of situation “convergence culture,” where “old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (p. 2). In such a world—our world today—a film like *The Matrix* does not have to be just a film. Indeed, as Jenkins notes, “no film franchise has ever made such demands on its consumers” (p. 94), who were asked to wade through and absorb Web comics, anime, a computer game, film sequels,

and a “massively multiplayer online game” (p. 95) if they wanted to get the “whole” story.

Jenkins also reminds us that this “new” approach to storytelling is not so different in many ways than the fictional world of William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha novels (p. 116)—or the spiritual mythology of Blake. However, this current “convergence culture” also allows for an audience to *live beyond* the sender-receiver relationship, to swim in the fractal, dynamic complexity of the universe as Mandelbrot (1983) has revealed it to us. One example of such a situation is the incredible and startling interplay between producers who create each season of *Survivor* and the superfans who try to “spoil” the surprises before they are aired, with both parties in a constant struggle for control of what the show will ultimately be; this show is “television for the Internet age—designed to be discussed, dissected, debated, predicted, and critiqued” (p. 25). Sometimes we are so completely *living beyond* words these days that it is hard to believe that even things like *The Matrix* began simply with writers and ideas.

### **Living Beyond our Bodies**

Despite Wordsworth and Shelley’s obvious concerns with legacy and legend, perhaps no Romantic so devoted himself and his writing to *living beyond* as John Keats did. In a literary movement already rich with interesting and unusual biographies, Keats perhaps tops them all, and today serves as the archetype for our idea of the poet as a frail, sensitive young man preoccupied with death and loss. And though we might rush to blame him for the plethora of melodramatic teenagers who flock to the arts these days (and also limit their broader appeal), we ought to first understand the special circumstances in which Keats found himself, and the ways in which those circumstances

allow us, and our students, to explore his life and his works for clues—and maybe warnings—about our own interests in *living beyond* our bodies.

Though most of the prominent Romantics enjoyed relative financial stability and top-flight educations, few such advantages were available to Keats. He was born into a struggling working-class family, and by the time he was thirteen, he had lost both his parents. In the case of his mother, young John had “nursed her devotedly but unsuccessfully” (Mellor & Matlak, 1996, p. 1254) in her struggles with tuberculosis, a disease that would come almost to define him. He was later apprenticed to a surgeon, but left the field soon after completing his training to pursue poetry instead. However, both of Keats’s first two volumes of poetry, *Poems* and *Endymion*, were “viciously reviewed” (p. 1254) by conservative and liberal critics alike; one, John Gibson Lockhart, even called them “driveling idiocy” (quoted on p. 1254). This was certainly a blow for someone who plainly admitted a desire to be one of the greatest English poets, as were the tubercular death of his brother Tom in 1818 and the recognition that he, too, had contracted the disease in 1820 (p. 1255). Keats was a man too poor and sick to marry his beloved Fanny Brawne, and he had little time to realize his poetry dreams.

But here his life took a turn, sharply and mysteriously. Though he would be dead in 1821, from the time of his first struggles with his fatal illness in 1819 to his death roughly two years later, Keats produced poetry that rivaled any ever written by Shakespeare, Milton, and the other greats, and certainly any written by a man so young and in such short time. His work, especially his treasured odes, often seemed to face his impending death head on, with eyes open, looking for any life left in his twilight. In his “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819/1990) for example, Keats hears the ephemeral song of an

immortal bird and responds with an immortal song from an ephemeral poet. His “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820/1990), as well, asks what life can be contained in monuments when everything else around them is gone. It seems that once Keats knew he was going to die—and soon—he devoted himself to *living beyond* the body that failed him, and in many ways succeeded.

There is little more timeless than trying to overcome the weaknesses and short life of the body, and there is no shortage of works dealing with these issues; it is one of the places where the paths of St. Paul, computer programmers, genetics researchers, the pharmaceutical industry, and Victor Frankenstein come together. Though Mary Shelley’s 1831 book *Frankenstein* (yes, written by the wife of Percy Shelley) seems more like a warning against such death-conquering endeavors than a recommendation for them, we still see much of ourselves in the character of Victor Frankenstein, no matter how much he is to blame for the tragedies that spring from his work. As he mentions upon the death of his mother, we too have experienced how “the sound of a voice so familiar and dear to the ear can be hushed” (1831/1994, p. 24), and know all too well how the “fine form of a man” can be “degraded and wasted” (p. 30) over the years. And though we also perhaps understand the dangerous hubris involved, we are taken in just like Victor by his professor’s stories of men who could “command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows” (p. 27).

But, of course, to actually accomplish these kinds of tasks is not only difficult, but it is also ethically and emotionally messy, as Lesley Sharp (2007) points out so well in *Bodies, Commodities, & Biotechnologies*. Early on she tells us about the Malagasy people in Madagascar, for whom organ transfer—one of our most common death-defying



feats today—is still “unthinkable” because it “defies cardinal rules surrounding body integrity” (p. 16), and through such an example we are reminded that *living beyond* our bodies might mean different things to different people. She later discusses a condition not-coincidentally-called “Frankenstein Syndrome” (Beidel, 1987, quoted on p. 21), in which some of the patients who receive transplanted organs suffer from the “delusion” that they are “pieced together with parts from more than one body” (p. 22). The families of people who donate these organs are also often conflicted when it comes to *living beyond* the body, disagreeing sometimes heatedly about how to memorialize donors, or whether they should be memorialized for this “gift” at all (p. 32). Even the passing of blood—something we can reproduce—from one person to another complicates our interests in *living beyond*, as illuminated by the stories Bill Hayes (2005) tells in *Five Quarts*, ranging from legends of gladiators and spectators drinking the blood of vanquished warriors “to acquire their strength and courage” (p. 4), to real-life monster Elizabeth Bathory bathing in blood in search of sustained physical youth (p. 180), to the much more common experience of donating to a blood bank, where one person’s blood can live on in the body of a loved one or stranger who needs it. As the simple example of blood from black men being given to help white soldiers in World War II shows (p. 233), *living beyond* our bodies, especially in the bodies of others, is a complex and controversial idea.

There are other ways of *living beyond* our bodies, though, that do not involve other people’s bodies much at all. For one, Marcia Angell points out in *The Truth About the Drug Companies* (2005) that “for over two decades” now, the pharmaceutical industry “has been far and away the most profitable in the United States” (p. xxiii), and

also argues that little might change about this anytime soon, since the industry “has by far the largest lobby in Washington” (p. 198). Her book is a long and thorough detailing of our complicated and sometimes dangerous and dependent relationship with legal drugs, and shows in particular to what financial extent we seem willing to go in order to extend and/or improve (*live beyond*) our lives through the use of these drugs. The products we buy from the pharmaceutical industry biologically change who we are; that is why we buy them.

But even if the idea of a pill changing our biological makeup makes us squeamish, there are still other ways to *live beyond* our bodies that are even more abstract, as Eugene Thacker (2005) and Don Ihde (2002) discuss in *The Global Genome* and *Bodies in Technology*, respectively. As Thacker notes, we live in an “era in which it is commonplace to move from DNA in a test tube to DNA in an online database—and back again,” which means that the “metaphorical relationship between biology and information is raised to a new level” (p. xvi). If, in our contemporary understanding of science, “biological exchanges conceive of ‘life itself’ as informatic” (p. 11), then we must reconsider what we even mean by *living beyond* the body. Maybe contemporary science has proven what some say Aristotle believed: that “life” is not so much a material thing, and that “if you want to know what it is, look at what it does” (p. 69). The Romantics would certainly be happy to find that out. They might feel right at home with new scientific endeavors like tissue engineering, which is “marked by a lateral transcendence in which the body remains biological and material, but is also impelled technically to surpass itself” (p. 268). Will we outdo Saul/Paul (at least on earth) through

such “engineering,” physically becoming someone else where he could only take on a new name and behavior?

Ihde says that we may not even have to go so far as tissue engineering in order to *live beyond*. He argues that “we can—in technological culture—fantasize ways in which we get beyond our physical limitations or our social problems by means of technologies created in utopian imaginations” (2002, p. xiii). In the new arena created by the vast array of communication and computer technologies available today and possibly in the near future, Ihde suggests that we may one day laugh at the then-pretentious ambitions of Keats to *live beyond* his short life as an immortal poet; our new “ultimate goal of virtual embodiment is to become the perfect simulacrum of full, multisensory bodily action” (p. 7). I wonder if he listens to Radiohead.

### **Living Beyond our Experiences**

Even if we do not want to “engineer” our bodies or pursue complete virtual “embodiment” as permanently as these examples describe, most of us have to admit that we would like to change the experience of our lives, or *how* we experience our lives, at least temporarily. That many people pursue this kind of *living beyond* through the illegal drug industry (Angell’s next book?) is hardly worth mentioning, it is so common and accepted, if not acceptable. People have been using drugs “recreationally” to escape the bounds of their lives, whether those bounds are sensory, emotional, psychological, or just more a matter of boredom, since we have been able to do so—and that is certainly a long time. But to escape the tedium or pain of our “normal” lives, to *live beyond* our experiences, is something we have long undertaken in a variety of ways: we go on vacation, we take up hobbies, we watch/play sports, we lose ourselves in the myriad

technological toys of the entertainment industry, we fall in love. We even sometimes read a book, or write one, still today, in order to *live beyond* our daily lives, or imagine such an adventure, or both.

The Romantics, of course, were experts at such things, as most writers and readers are. Blake had visions, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley worshipped at the altar of imagination, Keats longed to fade quietly into the night with the song of a Nightingale, and Byron wrote himself into legend as his dark protagonists—here Childe Harold (1812/1986), there Manfred (1817/1986), later Don Juan (1819/1986). Byron was so successful in turning his life into fiction that other people did it as well. As Hayes (2005) reports, Dr. John Polidori traveled through Europe with Byron and Shelley (and Mary Shelley) for a while, before falling out with the difficult poets. Legend has it that he was so “inspired” by his experience with them that when he wrote a vampire story (one of the first), he modeled his blood-sucker on Lord Byron himself (p. 178).

Though Bram Stoker’s story of *Dracula* (1897/1988) was published too late to be properly considered Romantic, it is appropriate that some of its roots are in Polidori’s tale, and therefore in Lord Byron as well. In many ways, it is Romantic in spirit, as are Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886/2006) and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891/1998). Though they fall chronologically into what is usually considered the Victorian era in English literature, the protagonists act in very Romantic ways; the fact that they hide those actions is perhaps what makes them Victorian. But all three books are about the same general idea of *living beyond* our experiences, and what consequences may come from the ways we choose to do so.

*Dracula* is easily the most supernatural of the three, featuring a mysterious count in Transylvania who turns out to be an almost-immortal monster who used to be man, but now preys upon them. Stoker's Count Dracula is like an anti-superhero, whose considerable powers and few weaknesses are both kept very strict secrets, so that they might be better used to selfish advantage. He *lives beyond*, certainly, but he does so viciously and always at our expense, needing our lifeblood to fill his veins in a twisted nightmare of mandatory and complete blood donation. And though he *lives beyond*, he is like the doppelganger to the Romantic prophet, leading us to ruin rather than transcendence. Wilde's Dorian Gray is nearly as vicious and predatory and shadowy, though his story is more magical than supernatural and his gift is more superficial. Gray, the young man who is spurned on by his "admirers" and "mentors" to wish for the eternal youth he actually gets, manages to "keep up appearances" no matter what horrible deeds he does, while the marks of his sins are transferred to the portrait that hangs in his attic. He is eventually stabbed in the heart like the Victorian, elitist vampire he is, by the one person he cannot fool: himself. But for a while, he transcends all moral bounds in a society that only cares how he looks, doing whatever he wants whenever he wants and greeting the next day with a handsome smile that erases all doubts about his character.

Stevenson's Jekyll/Hyde character is similar, but even more interesting to us today; not only does he manage to *live beyond* his normal experiences and all bounds of moral or social conscience, but he also does so with a completely *different* physical appearance rather than Dorian Gray's eternal youth. In this way, he commits all of his sins *virtually*, to speak like Ihde (2002) might, and attributes all of his dark deeds to what we might call his "avatar" today. He also accomplishes all of this through science, in a

crude sort of combination of pharmaceuticals and tissue engineering. In short, Stevenson gives us a re-written Saul/Paul story, in which Paul (Dr. Jekyll) helps the sick by day (this time physically rather than spiritually) and Saul (Hyde) preys upon the meek at night. If Paul's story is one of spiritual *conversion*, Dr. Jekyll's is one of spiritual "backsliding" that eventually overcomes him. Paul is famous for the "thorn in his side" that he constantly has to fight; Dr. Jekyll just loses the battle. Both stories tell us what Dr. Jekyll makes explicit; that "man is not truly one, but truly two," made up of the "provinces of good and ill which divide and compound man's dual nature" (p. 52). We are always, then, living more than one life; we are always *living beyond*.

Ultimately, in a world that seems to invent a new way to *live beyond* nearly every day, what the Romantics remind us, upon *revision*, is that we have always been on this same quest, even if the roads get paved, or the cars get faster, or the scenery gets more entertaining. In fact, when Aldous Huxley wrote *The Doors of Perception* (1954/2004), a book completely devoted to trying to *live beyond* our experiences through drug-induced sensory changes, he was inspired to undertake such a project as much by old traditions (particularly the Indians of Mexico, p. 9) as the availability of new psychoactive drugs, or perhaps *Dr. Jekyll*. The edition I have even uses a Blake quote on the first page, the source of Huxley's title: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite." The point for Huxley—one that is often missed, I feel sure—is not the drugs; it is the *living beyond*. When he revisits the experience of taking mescaline, he compares the world as he saw it with the world as van Gogh did (p. 28), or as a "composition that was like something by Braque or Juan Gris" (p. 21). He even says early on (p. 14) that he hopes that "by means of systematic medication, or else by taking

the appropriate drug, [he] might so change [his] ordinary mode of consciousness as to be able to know, from the inside, what the visionary, the medium, even the mystic were talking about.” He cannot see the world in the way that a Blake or a van Gogh could, and he hopes the mescaline might give him that.

Huxley says that over the years our brains have learned to shut off some of our “extra” sensory experiences, to close off the “doors of perception” that keep us from knowing the “Mind at Large” (p. 27), or the complete range of life experiences available to us. These “extra” things are what our visionary artists see for us and try to share. In other words, it may be that much of *living beyond* is simply *truly living*, in the expanded, transcendent way that the Romantics explored, “doors of perception” open wide. If that is true, even if we never “conquer” death or suffering or boredom, we may at least be able to live better, fuller lives. And if we do not want to resort to mescaline like Huxley, maybe we can develop our own imaginations, open the “doors of our perceptions,” by exploring the visions of those who could hear the songs and feel the winds that we cannot; Blake didn’t need mescaline, after all. But no matter how we choose to *live beyond*, through technological and scientific methods or otherwise, we can turn, with *revision*, to the world’s Romantics as guides to learn a little more about how to open our eyes to the world only a few of us have so far seen. Isn’t it the full, “extra,” expanded world we really want to show our students? Of course we do. We want the curriculum to help them to *pass*, to *live beyond*. And maybe we already have books and museums for that—dusty ones.

*Chapter 8***Time for Some *Feedback*: A Curricular Defense of the Pop Song**

*“I’ve heard there was a secret chord  
that David played, and it pleased the Lord  
But you don’t really care for music, do you?”*

(Leonard Cohen, “Hallelujah,” 1985)

*“Music is my savior, and I was maimed by rock and roll.  
I was maimed by rock and roll.  
I was tamed by rock and roll.  
I got my name from rock and roll.”*

(Jeff Tweedy of Wilco, “Sunken Treasure,” 1996)

We can probably safely assume that Leonard Cohen was not directly addressing curriculum theorists when he wrote his much-loved and often covered song “Hallelujah” (1985). The song relies heavily on Judeo-Christian imagery in an emotional tale of the pains and joys of love, and never once mentions school, but I cannot help but notice that Cohen’s accusatory question is bigger than a simple comment about differences between lovers, no matter how insightfully and powerfully it is expressed. In these two lines I hear a condemnation of the way many of us approach life today, eschewing rapturous, transcendent experience, or explorations of the beautiful unknown, in favor of the cold, quantifiable, commercially viable, and easily understood. I hear him say that far too many of us “don’t really care for music”; we are surrounded by it, sure, and perhaps more than at any other time in history, but we put it aside quickly and dismissively when it is time to get down to “serious” academic matters, like a girl we date but don’t want to bring home to meet the family.



As a high school literature teacher, I am certainly all too familiar with the effect this “practicality” and “seriousness” have had on our contemporary curriculum, especially in our high schools: we have dismissed out of hand the very text through which we may have the best chance of truly reaching our students, and ignore daily how rich a text it is, for all manner of studies and discussions. Theodore Gracyk points out in *Listening to Popular Music* (2007) that whether we keep the text that is popular music out of schools or not, “adolescence and young adulthood is a distinctive stage of our *musical* lives, uniquely configured so that an individual’s relationship to music plays a profound role in the formation of identity” (p. 181, his italics). What is more, this important, identity-forming text is everywhere we look, and yet we in public education still somehow manage to turn away, to refuse to see it; we don’t use iPods in our classrooms, but instead seize them and punish the students to whom they belong. Is there a “secret chord” that might “please the Lord”? Can we be saved by rock and roll? We don’t even ask these questions.

And that failure to even ask is certainly a shame, and a surprising one. Popular music does have some pretty obvious curricular tie-ins, even if they are often explored half-heartedly; we don’t *study* popular music so much as use it as a garnish we hope will make more “serious” subjects look cool. We might mention popular music’s roots in math (boost those test scores!), point to its employment of the technologies that represent science’s newest advances, listen to it while we paint in art class, or briefly discuss in history class the lyrics of or reaction to some protest song in a unit on the socio-economic struggles of recent decades. Occasionally, one might even happen upon an English teacher who knows that people like Georgiades and Nietzsche remind us that what we

think of separately as “music” and “literature” actually come from the same roots; “both prose language and poetry derive from the exactly, comprehensively musical complex of ‘*musike*’” in ancient Greece (Babich, 2006, p. 45). This kind of inclusion, though, is rare and rarely feels natural, more foreign even than foreign languages, despite the fact that rock and roll has been pervasive for at least two generations now—in other words, nearly everyone in every school building in the country today was raised with it readily available, and many were shaped by it. As Lawrence Grossberg says in “Rock, Territorialization, and Power” (1991/1997), our “musical environments strongly influence the rhythms, tempos, and intensities of our lives” (p. 96) whether our school doors are largely shut against those environments or not, and it is worth noting that while the musical environments of our teachers and our students are different, they are not from different worlds, and in fact have much in common; we are often not talking about a “Beatles/Beethoven” difference, after all, but more like a “Beatles/band inspired by the Beatles” difference. I focus on rock because it is the type of popular music I know best, though it is certainly not the only type, or the only popular text worth teaching. Even hip-hop, popular music’s “new kid,” has crossed the generational gap now, since it is roughly thirty years old.

In fact, the roots of popular music today, almost regardless of what other names we give it, can be found in big band, swing, jazz, country and western, blues—meaning that while we usually take “pop music” to mean something like “rock and roll young people listen to,” it is actually something everyone alive today likely has some nostalgic, identity-forming experience with, even if it has been a while since they thought of their music that way. Nevertheless, despite its connective powers and possibilities for people

of all kinds and ages outside of school, we still largely shun popular music from the academic world of our classrooms, and the reason why is perhaps that it presents us with the very thing we want to hear least, in many senses of the word: *feedback*. No matter how the word is used, our response is much the same, which is to complain that we don't know what to make of it or do with it, and so we shut it off as quickly as we can.

However, people like mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot (1983) have been telling us for years that the iterative *feedback* loops all around us can help us see the world as a fractal, dynamic, complex place full of beauty we have hardly begun to notice. Perhaps we should *revise* this aspect of popular music, open our eyes—or in this case, our ears—in new ways to the *feedback* we have always refused and dismissed.

When an electric guitar erupts with a wail of *feedback*, we are forced to consider whether the abrasive sound is still “music” or merely “noise” put forth for shock value; similarly, when students offer *feedback* about the parts of their lives they cannot control (education included), we are forced to decide if they deserve attention because their lives hang in the balance, or dismissal because their lives so far are relatively short, unlearned, and inexperienced. The eventual decision to shut down both of these kinds of *feedback* may stem from the unfairly negative connotations associated with the word. In its most basic sense, *feedback* is just a looping process any PA-system novice can understand, no training in complex math or Mandelbrot sets (1983) needed. Put simply, when a microphone and the speakers it feeds face each other, auditory *feedback* occurs: the sound signal travels into the microphone and down the cord into the PA system, gets processed, mixed, and amplified, travels up more cords to the speakers, and is finally sent back into the air in front of the microphone—thus restarting the process, albeit slightly altered.

Unfortunately for *feedback*, this process sometimes makes a pretty awful screech and sends people running to pull plugs and turn knobs to stop it. Not every *feedback* loop needs to be shut down, however. For example, Cohen's "Hallelujah" has been covered countless times—the version I know is Jeff Buckley's gorgeous, ethereal one—and so it serves as the site for a pop music *feedback* loop of sorts, just the kind Mandlebrot (1983) might like, in many ways the same beautiful song each time and in just as many ways a completely different one. In school, the loop involving our students is especially important. We try to give them what they need, but when that is not working, or could simply be improved, we can run *their* signal *and* ours through our teaching designs, again and again, creating a *feedback* loop to the betterment of everyone; as William E. Doll, Jr. (1993) puts it, "teachers and students need to be free, encouraged, *demande*d to develop their own curriculum in conjoint interaction with one another" (p. 163). If we are going to give them voices, after all, we ought to listen to those voices every now and then, even when what they say hurts our ears.

In academia, though, and especially in public schools, we tend to cover our ears to whatever is abrasive or confusing about the voice of the young, which is often expressed in popular music; we often do not like to hear what this text has to say, and we do not like how it is said. We ultimately argue that pop music doesn't *fit* anywhere, that we already have music class, that the math is too simple, that the lyrics aren't poetry, that studying Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" not only doesn't help us meet any state standards or prepare for any exams, but also might offend some religious sensibilities. But in a world that becomes harder to understand seemingly every day, it is precisely time to study things that don't fit easily into any category, that make us uncomfortable sometimes, and

yet make their presence felt in every field; it is time for some *feedback* in public education, if we want to go forward from here, if we want to cross the chasm that grows ever wider between what schools offer students and what those students want out of their lives and need in order to navigate the world they will find outside school walls.

Popular music's powers are mystical, its methods mysterious, and its substance maybe even more mythological than mathematical, but that certainly doesn't mean we should not listen to this voice of the young, even in school. We may have to train our ears to hear differently from now on, learn how to appreciate its *feedback*, but if we can, we will likely find that popular music is a meta-curricular text that can be read, and should be read, almost anywhere in the course catalog. It is still true that "liberal education is education in culture or toward culture" (Strauss, 1968/1995, p. 3); however, it is no longer true that that culture can be studied through only the "great books" (p. 3), and perhaps popular music is a new text that we must admit shapes our culture as much as any of those "great books" does. Besides, we may also discover what rock and roll has known for decades: *feedback* can be beautiful. And if Mandelbrot (1983) was right about how *feedback* works in nature, it may even open up our curricular world, inside and outside the classroom, to us in ways we have scarcely yet imagined.

### **"I Got my Name from Rock and Roll"**

Chris Cornell, himself no slouch of a rock and roll singer, has said of Jeff Buckley that "listening to him sing—it's one of those indications that the human race isn't all bad and life is worth living and there is beauty and brilliance in humanity" (2008, p. 93). Another of my favorite songwriters, Ryan Adams, has been praised by music critic Steve Labate for having "always excelled at providing this fleeting moment of connectedness,

to a stranger, and thus to humanity; that beautiful instant we're no longer locked inside ourselves" (2008, p. 56). Despite these statements' obvious gushing and melodrama, I cannot help but agree. I did not discover Buckley's music until well after I had formed my own band, but if I had not already by then fallen under rock and roll's spell, Buckley's version of "Hallelujah" surely would have done the trick. And Adams's songs are a constant source of frustration and writerly admiration for me in my own songwriting efforts, as he continuously manages to do with seemingly little effort the things at which I labor in vain. In short, I have always been moved, inspired, hurt, and overjoyed by music, and was especially vulnerable to its powers in my formative teenage years—or to paraphrase Jeff Tweedy of Wilco, I have been maimed, tamed, named, and ultimately saved time and again by rock and roll.

I bought my first guitar—a \$250 Alvarez—from an Andy's Jewelers in a small Georgia town when I was seventeen. I was "working" as a lifeguard at the one pool in town, my girlfriend was gone for the summer, there was little to do and less to spend money on—so I bought a guitar. I grew up singing in choirs, but at seventeen I had little formal music education, no idea how to play a guitar, and not enough money even to buy a case for it, let alone pay for lessons. But after I asked the one girl I knew who could play to chart a few chords on some index cards and worked up some calluses on my fingers, I felt like I was ready to give it a shot. All I wanted to do was write songs, anyway (I had no idea how to do that, either), so I didn't worry much about technique. And when I managed that first clean chord, a bright, ringing, heavens-opening-up "G," followed it with the shockingly natural "C" and "D," and sprinkled in "Em" for variety and "Am" for emotional weight, I was hooked for good; almost fifteen years of shows

with bands and various combos later, I am still trying to save up the money to record the next album, which is already written and ready to go. I am even now fighting the urge to stop writing for the day and go pick up the guitar (a much nicer Taylor these days).

Though only a portion of young music *lovers* go on as I did to become music *makers*, there is just something about popular music that is inextricable from young people, and is perhaps even part of what it means to be “young.” Young people listen sometimes obsessively to their favorite bands, dress like them, wear their t-shirts like badges of honor (name tags?), and even occasionally make or break friendships based on music preferences. My first ice-breaker question to my students each year is “What do you listen to?” precisely because I feel like it is such a valuable way to start to get to know them. As Grossberg says in “Is There Rock After Punk?” (1986/1990), “rock and roll celebrates youth, not merely as a chronological measure but as a difference defined by the rejection of the boredom of the ‘straight’ world” (p. 116)—they like their music, *are* their music, in part because it is not “old people’s music,” and perhaps because it feels like the first thing they have known that belongs to them, and somehow validates them.

However, it is important to remember that literal chronology may not matter so much as *figurative* chronology; Grossberg worries later in his article about a kind of age-collapse, arguing that young people are increasingly showing “troubled and adultlike qualities” (p. 119) while baby boomers are in some ways refusing to grow up at all, perhaps because both generations tie their identities so tightly together now with a music that defines itself, and therefore defines them, too, as “young” while the world outside that music repeatedly refuses them the accompanying innocence that youth implies.

David Riesman noticed as early as 1950 in his “Listening to Popular Music” that it can be a “socializing” force, even telling us how to be young; he says it “gives us a picture of childhood” consisting of “haphazard clothes and haphazard behavior, jitterbug parlance, coke-bar sprees, and ‘blues’ that are not really blue” (1950/1990, p. 7). If we update the cultural references, we find that not much has changed in our picture of youth-through-music, and perhaps this has contributed to the identity problems Grossman sees today.

Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel also point out that while we treat pop music “as the exclusive property of the teenager,” ultimately this is “nonsense” (1964/1990, p. 36); when my father listened to the Beatles as a teenager, they were “his,” and when I in turn listened to the Beatles as a teenager, they were “mine”—but what about my father? Must he pass on those records and quit listening to them, no matter how he feels about them, and must I do the same for my students? Perhaps what we have here is not so much a generation gap as a generation *feedback* loop, in which the Beatles look a little different (*revised*) each time they are run through the cultural processor. And perhaps a curriculum that included pop music could more readily address this quandary, recognizing it as a bridge across generations rather than an endless turf war resulting in a nation of Peter Pan’s who hate their fathers and their sons.

### **Rock ‘n’ Roll High School?**

Unfortunately, bringing popular music into the high school curriculum is not as simple as installing stereo systems in classrooms or passing out iPods; there are some serious objections to a “Rock ‘n’ Roll High School” (to steal from the Ramones, 1978), and they fall primarily into two camps: those who don’t think the popular music text is worthy of serious academic treatment, and those who complain that they wouldn’t know



how to teach it even if it were deemed worthy. One of the notable leaders of the first camp is Theodor W. Adorno, whose objections to popular music—or really anything aside from what we today call “classical” music—being taken seriously are many and varied. For one, he claims that to teach popular music as a text would be inappropriate; not only is “classical” music the only kind worth studying, but he also says that “to interpret music is to make music,” which means that the language of music “demands to be imitated, not decoded” (1956/2002, p. 115).

Even if it is kept outside of academic study, Adorno’s disdain for popular music and its culture is clear; he particularly dislikes its urging us to dance, which he says often has “convulsive aspects” that remind him of “the reflexes of mutilated animals” (1938/2002, p. 309), and derisively says that the only kind of listener who could become expert at the music played on the radio is the kind with “much free time and little freedom” (p. 310). As for the music itself, he argues that its tendency toward standardization—verse-chorus-verse with a nice bridge after the second chorus, etc.—is “wholly antagonistic to the ideal of individuality in a free, liberal society” (1941/2002a, p. 442), claims that its “repetition gives a psychological importance which it could otherwise never have” (p. 447), and says that this musical environment ensures that “boredom has become so great that only the brightest colors have any chance of being lifted out of the general drabness” (p. 449). All of this, of course, Adorno contrasts with “serious”—read: “classical”—music experienced live, in which “every detail derives its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece which, in turn, consists of the life relationship of the details and never of a mere enforcement of a musical scheme,” and he adds that “nothing corresponding to this can happen in popular music” (p. 439).

Much of this argument belongs to the family of “canonical,” “Great Books”-type discussions taking place in all humanities fields, in which Strauss-reading elder statesman of all stripes insist vehemently that their largely biased, subjective tastes are rather built upon objective grounds and that their criteria for these “acceptable” works are not at all murky. Quite frankly, these positions are old, elitist positions often put forth by people who would not mind being called old or elitist; they (both the people and their positions) are dying out, closing the doors to rooms few people visit anymore, anyway, and we should recognize this as one of Thomas S. Kuhn’s (1996) paradigm shifts, and maybe look forward to a future in which this kind of argument is at least made less and less. Today, we can agree that pop music is often standardized, and repetitive, and dominated by the “brightest colors”; we do not agree, however, about whether or not this is a bad thing. However, some of Adorno’s other arguments about popular music, and especially its technological aspects, are interesting and insightful, though their effect is to make popular music more worthy of study rather than less.

Met with the prospect of his beloved Beethoven played over the radio, Adorno claims that radio broadcasts ruin his compositions, no matter their good intentions, by encouraging “retrogressive tendencies in listening” (1941/2002b, p. 252) and offering the “overburdened hypothetical farmer” a beautiful work of art “affected and deteriorated by radio transmission” (p. 253). This deterioration is due primarily to the “compression of the dynamic range” (p. 259), and results in a far inferior experience that he sums up thusly: “a model of a cathedral in table size is something totally different from the actual cathedral” (p. 256). Recordings of music are just as bad, it seems, and Adorno complains

that “as the recordings become more perfect in terms of plasticity and volume, the subtlety of color and the authenticity of vocal sound decline” (1965/2002, p. 271).

These comments are echoed everywhere today, except that the laments are inspired by a new technology, the MP3; in short, we are hearing a music-technology *feedback* loop, in which the same issues are important again in a different time and place—and in which Adorno’s allies in the discussion work for *Rolling Stone*. In his *Rolling Stone* article “The Death of High Fidelity,” Robert Levine complains about the very same “dynamic range compression” (2007, p. 15) that bothered Adorno years ago and says that new digital recording techniques lead to what many are calling “ear fatigue.” Engineers today compress the size of the digital file of a recorded song, eliminating subtle details and increasing the volume of what is left. This format of the music makes it more flexible, in that it can be transported through new digital technologies more easily and can also catch the attention of listeners in today’s noisy environments, but it also ruins the experience of the music for many “audiophiles,” robbing it of dramatic impact, like a roller coaster with only one long, three-and-a-half-minute drop: “by maintaining constant intensity, the album flattens out the emotional peaks that usually stand out in a song” (p. 16). These issues are a useful site for important discussions with our students about art, technology, and commerce, and ironically mean that Adorno should probably be taught in our high schools right along with the very popular music he dismisses.

The other camp of popular music’s conscientious objectors has a point—the practical difficulty of pop music’s curricular inclusion—that cannot so easily be chalked up to elitism, or age, though its position is ultimately, like Adorno’s on technology, also

ironically self-defeating. Popular music is indeed hard to talk about, at least academically, let alone teach; it is too magical, too mysterious, too much experienced and too little understood. Aside from the obvious issues of where it fits into our strictly regulated course divisions and structures, we must also admit that we love popular music, and testify that it moves us, but cannot often say why, and so we don't know what to do with it in school. We may be able to believe that men were lured to their deaths by the Sirens' song, that Orpheus charmed even Hades to do his bidding with his lyre, that the great musician-king David somehow found a chord that pleased the Lord; but we in education also seem content to let David keep his "secret," to accept that we don't know why those songs worked their magic, or even what they sounded like. In fact, it is hard to say today even what a song *is*, really, or where it exists: in the composer's head, on some recording medium, on sheet music notation, or in live performance? Every rendering of every song is something different, and yet the same (each one part of a *feedback* loop). When we talk about our favorite songs, what do we even mean? What could we hold up and say "this, this is what I love"? Almost everything about popular music is ephemeral, elusive, mystical.

We are not even sure how we should feel about Adorno's "serious" music in our curriculum; when public school budgets get tight, music programs are often the first to go. An academic climate like this ensures that expanding music's admittedly tenuous place in the curriculum is a difficult argument indeed. Even if the subject itself were better respected, popular music's great practitioners also do not much help its cause as academic matter, famously behaving in non-school-appropriate ways, and doing so proudly. Many pop songs actually rail against the school system in their lyrics, and even

the most intellectual of pop stars sometimes cling to the punk ethos that says school is no place to rock, agreeing with Adorno and thumbing its nose at him simultaneously; David Brackett admits at the beginning of his discussion of an Elvis Costello song that the artist once told a music magazine that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture—it’s a really stupid thing to want to do” (2000, p. 157).

However, it is precisely this *feedback* that makes popular music’s inclusion in the high school curriculum so important. For one, a “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2004, p. xiii) without antagonistic, unexpected, or strange voices is not very complicated, or much of a conversation. Perhaps the fact that popular music is so important to our lives and yet left out of our education is even a good place to start that part of the conversation. Besides, keeping the mystical and the elusive out of the curriculum doesn’t make them go away, or even keep them out of the building; we don’t teach love or religion in most places, but I have not heard of a high school without them, or a student who would rank tomorrow’s test above them in importance. And anyway, we really just pretend that the world, and the curriculum through which we learn about it, is not already mystical as it is.

### **Weird Science and the Math of God**

It is one of the great myths of academia that the arts and sciences are polar opposites. Their scholars are rather like Republicans and Democrats, with even fuzzier lines demarcating membership, inspired by the same things and headed toward much the same destination, albeit taking different roads to get there. All of these men and women meet the day and all it promises to show us with wonder, and with a passion to know that wonder better, to feed it, to sustain it, and to pass it on to the young people whose open

eyes and endless questions are the tell-tale signs of future scholars, future “wonderers.” We all want to know what this place is, this life is; we ask what it might mean and what is the best way to spend the time and energies it affords us. And the best of both scientists and poets will admit that it is still a “wonder-full” world, that there is still much worth “wondering” about; it is still true, as astronomers Yuriy Baryshev and Pekka Teerikorpi (2002) remind us, that “an infinitely large store of information is still unknown for us” (p. 3). They also point out that the admission of such relative ignorance, which naturally follows watching great ideas and theories come and go, serves to “soften human proudness” (p. 3)—it not only gives us a much-needed dose of humility from time to time, but also perpetually justifies the work of education, and gives it impetus to go forward.

Music, it seems, is an eternal force for humanizing the sciences, pushing even the greatest rational minds toward flights of fancy and metaphysical speculation—it makes poets of scientists, and also scientists of poets. For example, today we have the fascinating and confusing work of people like Oliver Sacks, whose *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (2007) is full of stories about the often bizarre ways our brains react to music or store knowledge of it, and asks us to *revise* our understanding of our relationship with music. Sacks begins his book not with explanations for the cases he will discuss, but rather with wonder at the power of music, noting that “we humans are a musical species no less than a linguistic one” (p. xi) despite the fact that this music, in a scientific sense at least, seems to have “no necessary relation to the world” (p. ix). He then marvels at extreme cases of music’s effects on the brain anyway, including some in which the mental repetition of “catchy” songs becomes almost “pathological” (p. 41), and

notes that while such “involuntary repetition” of other things is a sign of Tourette’s, OCD, or brain injury, “the automatic or compulsive internal repetition of musical phrases is almost universal” (p. 45). As for other odd brain behavior, Sacks has found cases of people who hear violins before having seizures (p. 18), people who cannot communicate verbally but *can* sing (p. 215), and even synesthetes who experience an “instant conjoining of sensations” (p. 165) and are baffled that not everyone sees “colors associated with musical keys” (p. 168). Further establishing the brain’s special and puzzling relationship with music, he comments that “anatomists today would be hard put to identify the brain of a visual artist, a writer, or a mathematician—but they could recognize the brain of a professional musician without a moment’s hesitation” (p. 94).

However, perhaps we should not be so surprised at books like *Musicophilia*, because many of science’s most luminous stars have fallen under music’s mystical spell at least as deeply as I have. Perhaps the most prominent and storied example of this elusive romantic quest to wed science to music is the so-called “Harmony of the Spheres,” in which almost countless scientists have speculated, and tried to prove, that the movements and positions of the heavenly bodies correspond to the mathematical relationships underlying music theory in a way that suggests they make music as they rotate in their orbits—had we but ears to hear, we might enjoy God’s perpetual symphony, or so the legend has it. As Theon of Smyrna explains:

“According to the doctrine of Pythagoras, the world being indeed harmoniously ordained, the celestial bodies which are distant from one another according to the proportions of consonant sounds, create, by the movement and speed of their revolutions, the corresponding harmonic sounds.” (1979/1993, p. 18)

Though certainly not every scientist has accepted this understanding of the universe offered by the Pythagoreans, Baryshev and Teerikorpi (2002) remind us that it was ideas like these that first led to the “mathematization of the universe” which is now “so basic in science,” or in other words the idea that “it is possible for a thinking human being to learn of its structure, even without visiting its every corner” (p. 8). Joscelyn Godwin (1993), who traces the legend’s origins and development—its *great feedback loop*—over the centuries in *The Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music*, tells us that followers of Pythagoras found in Plato’s difficult writings on the “World-Soul” an idea of “harmony of tone and number” that, when matched with their own experiments and studies of planetary movements and instrumental acoustics, became for them a kind of “Grand Unified Theory: an archetype of the harmony which permeates and unites both the greater and the lesser world” (p. 9). Despite sometimes the criticism of their peers, scholars from Ptolemy to Kepler have been drawn to this beautiful but elusive theory of the universe’s secret musical order like the Sirens’ song, *revising* it by adding in scientific theory and method advances as well as a fresh, unique pair of eyes and ears each time. Ptolemy, for his part, saw no contradiction at all in this quest to understand the “Harmony of the Spheres,” and claims that mathematics is devoted to the “theoretical investigation of the Beautiful” and also to the “exhibition and practical employment” of its findings (1934/1993, p. 23); in this case, he might say that what is theoretically discovered about the musicality of the planets, no matter how outlandish it may seem, can be performed on an instrument with the hands.

Kepler’s work even goes a step farther than those who came before him and actually, according to Godwin, “takes the trouble . . . to demonstrate it” (1993, p. 221).



In *Harmonices Mundi*, Kepler claims that “all the notes of the major mode are represented within one octave . . . by all the extreme motions of the planets except for the perihelions of Venus and Earth and the aphelion of Mercury” (1619/1993, p. 230); today, recent research has shown that Kepler’s theory “not only far exceeds random expectation, but is reinforced by measurement of the outer planets that were not yet discovered in Kepler’s day” (Godwin, 1993, p. 222). Since Kepler’s discoveries, other theorists have carried these ideas of a pervasively musical universe even farther; American musical theorist Isaac Rice, for one, perhaps even offers a partial explanation for the wonder that is synesthesia, positing that “*tones and colors* are essentially the *same* things” (1875/1993, p. 388, his italics), only thought of as different because of our eyes’ and ears’ differing abilities to process their respective depth and height of pitch. Perhaps the most fascinating and spine-tingling of all, composer Emil Abel Chizat has even created a chart which shows the “Harmony of the Spheres come of age and reconciled with modern science” (Godwin, p. 399)—to put it simply, the “grand chord” of the universe in playable musical notation. Is Chizat’s chord perhaps the one David played? Could it be that our greatest, most undeniably catchy, most emotionally affecting pop songs resonate so powerfully and inexplicably with us because they replicate on a small scale some property of the music of the universe? Could it be that we hear in the songs we love *feedback* loops featuring some small part of the Great Song?

Maybe Cohen was trying to tell us the same thing Kepler was about that “secret” chord:

“It goes like this  
 The fourth, the fifth,  
 The minor fall, the major lift,  
 The baffled king composing ‘Hallelujah.’” (1985)

### **Ain't That America**

Sometimes it seems that everything about music, even pop music, is a matter of math. Indeed, there is a reason that my friend in high school only felt the need to show me a few chords: almost any song anyone would ever want to learn can be played through those few chords, with the occasional slight variation on the fingering of the fret board—or a capo, to move into a different key. After a while, one gets the impression that anyone can do it, that any young punk with a guitar can write a hit pop song: pick a key, move through the fourth and fifth of that key in various combinations to form a melody, sprinkle a couple of minor chords here and there, write some horoscope-vague lyrics full of mildly scandalous innuendo and the cleverly-twisted phrase, and voila! Of course, this is admittedly over-simplifying things a little, but not much.

Every genre has its formulas and guidelines, its singing and clothing styles, its go-to instrumentation; even genre-bending or genre-forming artists mostly just dress up the old skeletons in strange new clothes, as Brackett (2000) reminds us by pointing out that James Brown's "Super Bad," despite being heralded as "innovative," also features under its shocking vocal screeches and horn blasts a "harmonic movement that may be understood as an extended I-IV-V harmonic progression" (p. 145)—the same progression most songs on the radio use. Perhaps it is no wonder that Nashville gets a reputation for being a music factory of sorts, sticking close by the "rules of the game" down to what might seem like ridiculous detail, such as beats-per-minute or hair dye, not to mention endless financial investment/profit calculations. The rules, after all, often work, and often make people a lot of money.

However, they don't *always* work; pop music is not a science, though it does have science in it. In fact, pop music is like a great crossroads, a meeting place for all walks of life and perspectives—anyone who has seen what happens when “YMCA” or the “Electric Slide” is played for a crowd of people can attest to this. More seriously, though, a great pop song is formed by just the right mixture of scientific, mathematical, socio-historical, linguistic, and artistic forces; this is part of what gives pop music its meta-curricular importance. Mixed the right way at the crossroads, the result can be transformative for performer and listener. Perhaps pop music's most enduring legend of crossroads transformation is a kind of story-doppelganger to the story of David, in which blues pretender Robert Johnson went “down to the crossroads” and sold his soul to the devil for musical gifts (the result of a *feedback* loop of the David story, with the American South thrown in the mix?). He went there a hopeless novice and came back a feared master, one who would go on to lasting fame. True or not, it is the story of an American, of America the World's Great Crossroads (true or not), in which a man can choose his future despite his past, if only he has the will—but he'd better read the fine print. It is absolutely natural for America the Meta-Nation to be the home of the pop song, and even hard to imagine one without the other.

Though countless people have followed the dream of Robert Johnson in one way or another on a mystical quest for the American Dream by way of rock and roll, far more have failed than succeeded, likely because the necessary mixture of forces is so hard to get right, and if there is a formula it changes all the time, since the forces do: “Pop songs hold up a mirror to their age in the truest sense of the word, for they provide it with a blank screen on which its desires are reflected” (Hennion, 1983/1990, p. 205). What a

successful pop artist must do is *revise*: take a little of the old, a little of the new, filter both through his individual, unique perspective, try to figure out which way the wind is blowing (it is no wonder that “arrangers” and “mixers” and “producers” get paid so well)—and then turn the resulting song loose into the wild world, hoping to have calculated all the variables correctly. He must twiddle the metaphorical knobs of the forces at the crossroads until the *feedback* comes out beautiful.

To study popular music is to realize that its history is not a straight road, but rather full of twists, turns, digressions, accidental revelations, carefully-mapped disasters, and more loops than anyone can count. The results of such a journey are just as often puzzling as illuminating, infuriating as enlightening. For example, Mark Anthony Neal (1999) traces the roots of rock and roll to black popular music, and sees often what he calls the “commodification of black dysfunction” (p. 10), a situation in which blacks were and still are paradoxically empowered and oppressed by their centrality in American popular music, given opportunities for “the distribution of black expression” while often denied the respect and financial benefits their talents deserve. The often-documented and widely recognized “Elvis Presley” strategy of giving traditionally “black” music a “white” makeover to increase sales and mainstream acceptability is but one example of Neal’s point, since it popularized “black” music while robbing it of its “black” identity.

George Lipsitz looks at popular music’s cultural controversies through an even wider lense in *Dangerous Crossroads* (1994), as seen in his discussion of the landmark Paul Simon album *Graceland*, which features an eclectic mix of musical styles and influences from around the world. Though the album was celebrated for its “diverse musical styles” and “eloquent postmodern lyrics that stressed the connectedness of

cultures,” Simon was also criticized for his ultimate “alleged complicity with dominant power relations in the music industry and in society at large” (p. 57). Less controversially, but just as interestingly, Greil Marcus finds in *Mystery Train* (2008) that the “richness” of the Band’s masterpiece *Big Pink* is due to the Canadian/American group’s “ability to contain endless combinations of American popular music without imitating any of them” (p. 48). In the Band’s music Marcus finds the positive aspects of the same sort of conflux of forces in popular music described by Neal and Lipsitz, saying that the music is “personal, their own invention, but not merely personal; it is an unpredictable resolution of a common inheritance, something we shared in pieces” (p. 48). The glorious result of all of this mess is sometimes the great pop song, and perhaps a three-minute ear-candy glimpse of the beauty that America can sometimes be—with *revision*.

And this is why *feedback* is so important. The history of America and the history of pop music are not really all that different from the history of anything else, really. Studied closely and in depth, it becomes clear that the history of every field of study (history included) is not linear or repetitive, but rather pretty loopy, often in strange, unpredictable ways. To put it another way, pop music shows that history does not repeat itself—it *feeds back*. Or as Mandelbrot (1983) might say it, pop music reminds us that the universe is *fractal*.

### **Chinese Translation**

Let me pause here and admit that all of the theories and theorists so far discussed involve Western understandings of music, which are certainly not the only kind. I must also admit that some may look at an idea like the “Harmony of the Spheres” and see an

underlying implication that Western music is the music of God, or the universe—which perhaps carries with it an implication that other kinds of music are therefore *not* of God, or are at least lesser, perhaps incorrect understandings of music. Two answers can be made for this, though. First, the theorists discussed here can hardly be blamed for their Western understandings of music, since they are Western. Even pop music can be excused; if America is the hub of popular music, and that music’s success depends upon it being popular, then of course Western music is going to be predominant.

Second, the fact of these theories being based on Western understandings of music is hardly the point. The point is rather that our music seems to share with our universe some kind of “deep structure” (Baryshev & Teerikorpi, 2002, p. 231) that is not often seen at a glance. Perhaps the connections, revealed through music, among the various forces that make up our world are just signs of a deeper structure that we can scarcely see, a structure that connects all of us and all things. For example, M Ward’s 2006 song “Chinese Translation” speaks to this “deep structure” by showing that there are themes and questions that seem to exist outside of both time and place. The song is written as a *feedback* loop in both structure and content, telling through its lyrics *and* music the supposedly old Chinese story of a young man who “sailed a wild, wild sea” and “climbed up a tall, tall mountain” to ask an “old, old man” the Great Questions:

“What do you do with the pieces of a broken heart?  
 And how can a man like me remain in the light?  
 And if life is really as short as they say,  
 Then why is the night so long?”

The old man’s answer is, beautifully and perfectly, to tell the story of his own youth, his own sailing, his own climbing, and his own questions to the “old, old man” of his

generation: the very same questions the young singer is asking now. And in doing so, he, and Ward, unite us all in wonder.

Benoit Mandelbrot might say that Ward's song is a great example of the *fractal* nature of the universe. Mandelbrot coined the term in 1975 to explain "an essential aspect of Nature which was previously overlooked—even its rough features have hidden regularities" (Baryshev & Teerikorpi, 2002, p. 231), and countless people have found upon learning of fractals that when they *revise* their world, they see their characteristic self-similar shapes everywhere—that somehow Mandelbrot discovered what has been under our noses forever. When I first read about them, it was as if Mandelbrot said to me "Close your eyes. Now picture all at once an aerial view of rivers, the branches of a tree, the veins of a leaf, your own veins, the cracking of dry ground—even a highway map." And, suddenly, there it was: structure where I had never seen it, a world I had lived in and not looked at.

The real breakthrough for Mandelbrot, though, was a mathematical one; he not only saw fractals in nature, but figured out *how to create them*, how to tap into the deep structure of the universe. The "most famous fractal" created mathematically is called, of course, the "Mandelbrot set" and uses a shockingly simple process: "(the iteration  $z \rightarrow z^2 + c$ ) which defines a procedure, where the output of the calculation is the input for the next calculation" (Baryshev & Teerikorpi, 2002, p. 237). In other words, Mandelbrot discovered that the universe might be built upon *feedback* loops. With the powerful computers needed to test out and experiment with such iterations, mathematicians have been able to produce baffling images with seemingly infinite detail at their edges—no matter how much we zoom in, there is always more there. Some of the images produced

replicated so closely the structures seen around us in nature that these procedures have been used by Hollywood computer graphics artists (Briggs, 1992, p. 84) and visual artists of all kinds: “Indeed, the list of artists who have employed what are now recognized as fractal images would be very long,” and would include names like van Gogh, Escher, and Pollock (p. 166), whose work predated the mathematical discovery of fractals. Ward might be interested to know that we even recognize now that fractals can be found in “the mountains of ancient Chinese landscapes that have the turbulent look of frozen clouds” (p. 166). Maybe he already does know that, somehow.

William J. Jackson sees in Mandelbrot’s fractals far more than just a mathematical breakthrough; in his *Heaven’s Fractal Net: Retrieving Lost Visions in the Humanities* (2004) they seem more like a call to action, and a renewal of faith and wonder, and this is how we in curriculum studies should them. We should see that fractals open up a “dimension which is a deepening rather than a shallowing mode in human experience, intimating inner harmonies of order” (p. 24). Jackson urges us to live like the artist who “swims among possibilities,” always “on the lookout for creative permutations, serendipitous new juxtapositions” (p. 119). He argues, inspired by Mandelbrot’s fractals, that we should embrace a world, a life, of *feedback*; I agree, and would add that we should see our universe *and* our curriculum as dynamic, not strictly ordered and set in stone but rather full of possibilities, of wonder, of things forever old and new at the same time. He sees a world in which Cohen, and Buckley, and Tweedy, and Brown, and Simon, and the Band, and Ward, and all of the other participants in the great fractal, *feedback*-laden glory that is popular music serve as reminders of the “deep



structure” that ties us all together under the chaotic surface. He even sums up life, appropriately, in the language of music:

“We find ourselves in a place similar to where we began, as we might return to the refrain of a song, except now we have the benefit of other hindsights from our loop of experience, and we’re facing in another direction, ready for another foray.” (p. 132)

“Hallelujah,” indeed.

*Chapter 9***III Communication**

*“Like Ma Bell, I’ve got the ill communications”*

(Beastie Boys, 1994)

In the quote above, from the 1994 Beastie Boys album *Ill Communication*, there are primarily three things going on. First, the statement is—not surprisingly, given its source—a boast, and one of many eccentric, absurdist, off-the-wall claims made by the hip-hop group over the years. As such, it is an argument, a resume, for social prowess or acceptance; it is a game we all play, if not as well as the Beastie Boys, and the goal is to be “cool.” Thankfully, the young professionals who often become new BlackBerry Storm or iPhone owners don’t go around saying they now have “ill communications,” but I guess they could. Second, the Beastie Boys say their “communications” are “ill,” which is of course part of a long line of ironic labels, a linguistic progeny of “bad,” expressing in this case a claim of verbal dominance through its connection with the “Ma Bell” reference. Just as “Ma Bell” enjoyed a long monopoly over our telephone lines, the Beastie Boys now, according to them at least, rule the hip-hop world.

But the third, and little discussed, aspect of the lines above is the undercurrent of worry, of darkness, of actual negativity that always accompanies a boast of being “bad” or “ill.” When a move in basketball is “nasty,” or a teenager’s new cell phone is “sick,” what we are saying is something along the lines of “that is so impressive or unexpectedly better than the competition that there is almost something wrong about it.” Perhaps one need only think of an early Mike Tyson fight, for example, to understand this concept—

one of the under-a-minute pummelings that left us attracted/repulsed and utterly, hopelessly in love with/scared to death of Tyson.

Can something be so good it's bad? Of course it can. And this is where, in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century swarm of communications technologies, the Beastie Boys cross paths with both curriculum studies and language arts classes: these days we've all got "ill communications," and "ill" with all of its ambivalence attached. We boast with each new iPhone/BlackBerry-type toy in a running competition to out-gadget our friends and co-workers. We also, like it or not, must admit the dominance of these technologies in our personal lives, and certainly those of our students; when today's teenagers are not IM'ing, texting, or updating their "moods" or "status" on MySpace or Facebook, they are openly admitting that they simply cannot imagine a time without those things. Even President Obama cannot live without his BlackBerry, and CNN and countless U.S. senators have suddenly caught Twitter-mania. And yes, there are plenty of people—mostly people who *can* imagine, or remember, a world without these things—who worry that our new ways of communicating are making us "ill." And they don't mean "cool."

So are these new networking sites and technologies making relationships better or worse, keeping in touch easier or more superficial? Are they "ruining the world," as a colleague recently put it? The answer, of course, is probably neither "yes" nor "no," as is so often the case. We would do well to remember W. J. T. Mitchell's (2005) reminder that "media are always new" (p. 212), and that "the 'shock of the new' is as old as the hills, and needs to be kept in perspective" (p. 213). Most likely these are just "new" ways of communicating with each other, and whether they are good or bad for us depends a lot on context, on the people involved, the words chosen, the messages conveyed, the skill of

the sender and receiver, etc. They are mostly *language* technologies, after all, and therefore carry all of the strengths and weaknesses of their “old school” counterparts; lives have been saved and ruined by handwritten letters and face-to-face conversations, too. So the key, it seems, is to remember that “technologies contain multiple possibilities for use, direction, and trajectory” (Ihde, 2002, p. 108). We may not be able to turn back the technological clock, and probably should not want to, but we can teach our students how to communicate effectively—and healthily—in these new ways. In order to do so, we need to *revise* what it means to teach our students to communicate effectively, across the curriculum. This, of course, will likely mean bringing things into the language arts classroom, in particular, that we have so far been trying to keep out. However, if we want to prepare our students to communicate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if we want them to be ready to effectively navigate the complexity of the swelling seas of communication technology they will find outside school walls, then *that is what we must do*.

### **III-literacy**

Before the end of fall semester, students in my AP Literature and Composition class will have read approximately 6 novels, 3 plays, 25 short stories, and 50 poems, as well as occasional essays, supplementary materials, notes, and other educational aids. In the conventional way of thinking about it, these students are the most “literate” students in the school, having explored the works of many of Western history’s most influential voices. I try to reread as much as I can each year along with my students, so I know it is a lot of text to digest. However, on a normal Thursday, in addition to my “academic” work, I also listen to two albums worth of songs (20-30) during my planning time and before school, read 5 or 6 news articles during lunch, watch one news broadcast at home

while surfing the Internet, checking email, and cooking dinner, and then enjoy four shows on TV (including roughly 32 minutes of advertising, or 64 commercials). To put it simply, I do not pretend that my students only experience texts in my classroom, or that my classroom is even their primary venue for such experience, and no other language arts or humanities teacher should, either. We should also not pretend that our current language arts curriculum will be enough training, anymore, to face such a textually dynamic world. As J. Hillis Miller (1999) reminds us, “literature is just one symptom or product of culture among others,” and therefore it should be studied today alongside “film, video, television, advertising, magazines, and so on” (p. 73). However, it might be that language arts classes—those dusty museums of the old world, full of monuments to the “classics”—are precisely the places for the new world and media literacy to find a foothold in the curriculum, if we are only willing to *revise* those places and open the doors a little.

Luckily, I am not the only one who notices the abundance of media texts outside the classroom, or who believes that media literacy is absolutely vital for our students if we want them to be active participants in the world they will encounter when they leave our schools. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share (2005) tell us that students seeking literacy must gain the “skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts”; they also note that literacies “evolve and shift” as the world changes, and must presently in response to technological innovations and the abundance of media (p. 1). Rozana Carducci and Robert A. Rhoads (2005) add that “students are largely socialized through the media” (p. 3) today, and therefore need the literacy skills to analyze that socialization. Victoria Carrington and Jackie Marsh (2005) go so far as to

say that the technological innovations that are so much a part of our students' lives have worked with other factors to cause a "paradigm shift" (p. 280) comparable to the one caused by the printing press, and that literacy can no longer be limited to "basic print skills" (p. 279). Eve Bearne (2003) sums up what is now becoming clear to a building chorus of voices who are interested in helping our young people become independent, successful adults in our increasingly media-driven environment, when she says that because "young people are surrounded by and use multidimensional texts, they need to have ways of engaging with them critically" (p. 99). To borrow Lev Manovich's term (2001), it seems that a generation raised in a sea of "new media" will need to learn to swim with new literacies as well.

### **New Texts Make an Old Curriculum Ill?**

However, actually incorporating media literacy, or "critical thinking through and about mass media" (Schwarz, 2003, p. 45), into school curriculum is another matter. For example, so-called "purists" in literary education often complain about the sully of the "Great Books" when discussing this issue, as if anything that cannot be experienced fully as small, black type on a white page likely carries some sort of pop culture plague that will infect and eventually destroy our hallowed masterpieces. And to some extent, they have a point. One of the great virtues of our "classics," dusty though they may be, is that they have withstood in some cases far more lifetimes than our own, and so must be given a certain amount of respect. One reason for reading Shakespeare (and there are certainly many) is that he wrote 400 years ago, and we still care about his art, and feel that it still speaks to us; many of the media texts I am suggesting that we teach alongside Shakespeare were created yesterday, comparatively, and who can say what their impact

will be 400 years from now? Do we really think Twitter posts, for example, will be important sites of communication and expression in ten years?

These arguments and others like them make sense at first glance, which is why it is so shocking to hear Martha Bayles (2003) say that “contrary to what most academicians think, there is no ‘great divide’ between the ideas, practices, and values of the traditional arts and those of popular culture” (p. 15). Absurd, right? Heresy? Well, not exactly, when we remember that Shakespeare sold tickets, not books; Lord Byron was probably at least as read for his celebrity as his artistic appeal; and even the novel was the “next big thing” once upon a time. What would the great Shakespeare do if he were around today? No one knows for sure, but my money says he would be duking it out with Scorsese, Spielberg, and Eastwood for directing Oscars every year, and still scandalous for his homoerotic overtones and gutter humor.

There are a few things we cannot forget about text in the language arts curriculum, if we want it to be relevant and useful to students today while simultaneously holding on to the best that history has given us. For one, “purists” today act as if the printing press so vital to the existence, preservation, and distribution of our great works was not also once a new media innovation that called for radical change in the way the world understood and experienced texts. Second, the conventional idea of “true” literature as it appears in most textbooks and anthologies today is problematic and incomplete at best; these books do not so much record our greatest literary achievements as they prioritize works that can be easily gathered in simple, saleable, single-volume collections. This often means that short stories, poems, essays, and the occasional play

are taught in school, with a few novels thrown in as “supplementary” materials. But that is mostly an economic decision, not an artistic or otherwise academic one.

In fact, sometimes these books sell their beloved authors short, including them in truncated or otherwise anthology-friendly form. In the case of poet William Blake, whose vivid, painstaking multimedia work often changed with each edition, his expressions are greatly diminished when presented without their illustrative, visual aspects, as they usually are. Other works are “flattened” as well; poems, speeches, and ancient oral texts are denied their auditory appeal, no matter the fervor or subtlety with which they were intended to be delivered. And those crimes pale in comparison to what textbooks and anthologies do to drama. Anyone who has been stirred by the verbal jousting and tense linguistic lashes of the third act of *Romeo and Juliet* (1599/1997) only to find that the argument is settled by “*They fight. Tybalt falls [and dies]*” (3.1.126) knows that surely this cannot be what the author had designed.

At least in Shakespeare’s case, though, we know what we are missing. As classics scholars such as Dimitrios Yatromanolakis have discovered, many of our favorite ancient works may be experienced incompletely today, since much of their poetry was originally set to music that is now lost, and much Greek tragedy was a “complex combination of poetic text, solo and choral song, recitation with instrumental accompaniment, and dance” (Lester, 2002, p. 141) of which we have only fragments left. And as Carey Jewitt (2005) points out, even the simple, conventional print version of literature is not so simple; these texts are still “multimodal” in that they “require the interpretation and design of visual marks, space, color, font, or style” (p. 315). In short, literacy even in its infancy was likely a multimedia affair, and to *revise* our classrooms by



bringing other media forms into them today may be an opportunity to go back to literacy's roots and forward at the same time.

### **Meaningful Use of Technology**

Before I go too far down this road, however, let me make a confession. To many people, I must admit, I seem to be a neo-Luddite. I still do not have a cell phone, and sometimes rant about my students' attachment to theirs. I have never sent an "instant message" to anyone, excluding the occasional Internet-customer-service chats or "distance education" classes I have been unable to avoid. I still listen to albums on vinyl, whenever I can. I vehemently resent the online publishing of my grade book in programs like I-Parent, and I am often baffled when school administrators insist on seeing the "meaningful use of technology" when they observe my English classes. And though I have never gone so far as to actually destroy a machine, I do have to confess to a kind of vicarious joy whenever I watch the scene from *Office Space* (1999) in which the main characters kidnap, taunt, and demolish the hated, unreliable, techno-demon possessed office copier/printer in one of those mob-movie indeterminate locations, all set to a rap soundtrack. I have never taken a baseball bat to the Risograph at work, but I have felt the kind of irrational anger that inspired that scene, usually on Mondays when I need copies in five minutes that the machine refuses to make for me. "Call for assistance," it says, but that is certainly not what I feel like doing.

However, it is not the new tools the computer age has given us that cause such frustration and anger in me, even in the classroom, and I would argue that this is also true of most other people, whether they realize it or not. It is instead what these machines have done to us that is so bad, or rather what we have done to ourselves through them.

As Heidegger (1977) says in “The Question Concerning Technology,” “everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology” (p. 4); we have made it so much a part of our lives that we cannot function much without it—as the growing, serious talk of “BlackBerry addiction” among business professionals evidences—often without examining the consequences of such a relationship. We also use technology aggressively, like a “challenging” of the world, “which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such” (p. 14), approaching nature as something to be manipulated, to suit whatever purposes we devise, whenever we devise them. Indeed, our communications technologies in particular have brought us ever nearer to being the kind of “standing-reserve” (p. 19) Heidegger warns us about, treating each other as if we, too, are “ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that [we] may be on call for a further ordering” (p. 17). Of what use is an “instant message” if the receiver is not available to send an “instant response”?

Also, though most new devices are designed to make our lives and particularly our communications of information easier, they have often only made them faster, more superficial, and less free. In school, for example, I-Parent has made grades almost instantly available, resulting in even more grade-conscious students who obsessively check a class numerical average between periods that will be nearly meaningless tomorrow—and the more often they check it, the less that information is worth. Outside of school, fast food, instant everything, and email may seem great when we are in a hurry, but what if we are always in a hurry? We can work at home now, which also means that we never leave work. We can call anyone from anywhere, almost, but that

also makes it harder to truly get away. And how many messages are really important enough to need to be “instant”?

Having registered these complaints, though, I must also acknowledge that these things are likely here to stay, and so ought to be studied and explored so that our relationships with them are as healthy as possible. Heidegger (1977) was right: we are chained to technology “whether we passionately affirm or deny it” (p. 4). The problem is that we too often either accept it without question or dismiss it the same way, especially in schools. For example, there is a power strip (as yet unconnected) of five outlets in my room for a bank of computers I will apparently receive, and be expected to use, someday. What will I do with those computers that will enhance my students’ learning experience? I am not sure the question has even been asked. If it was, I was not around for it; I just came back one fall to find the strip installed.

On the other hand, I have certainly seen firsthand the virtues of our school’s new wireless computer lab when it is time for in-class essays. I am also increasingly frustrated that we have not even really tapped the educational potential of iPod-type devices for auditory learning experiences, web databases for research, or blogs for both journaling and journalism. Besides, I recognize that there would be more than a little hypocrisy in asking us to return completely to “the old days,” since I write this piece on a brand new laptop by electric light in a room controlled by a digital thermostat, and I will drive my climate-controlled, rolling living room to turn it in (or email it). I also know that my interest in vinyl (also technology, though old technology) is a matter of quality, but impractical quality these days, and when I recorded my last album, we used state-of-the-art digital equipment to achieve many of our “vintage” sounds.

In fact, in many ways technology—communication technology included—has had a wonderful effect on our lives, and we do not want to escape it, no matter the merit of our complaints in certain cases. For example, I recently reconnected with my childhood best friend, ten years absent, through my MySpace Music page, and I’ve been invited to become “friends” on Facebook with my old college roommates who are scattered around the state. Also, my brother is in Portland, Oregon, my brother-in-law is in Colorado, my sister is two hours away, and my parents are four hours away; email, Facebook, and webcam services like Skype allow us, despite these distances and our busy schedules, to participate in each other’s lives in ways that were not available a few years ago. I wish they were nearer, that we spent more time in the same room, but I am thankful in the meantime for every uploaded picture, or “status update,” or even the increasingly normal talk through a laptop screen.

As these examples attest, we are often healthier, happier, and more productive *because* of technological advances, not because we avoid them. And really, many of our complaints about and unhealthy relationships with technology come from a misunderstanding about what it is. As Heidegger (1977) points out, technology, in its essence, is not so much a “mere means” or a tool as it is a “way of revealing” (p. 12), and our word *technology* comes from the Greek *techne*, which referred to “knowing in the widest sense” and was used “not only for the skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts” (p. 13). Using the word in this sense, we do not live now in the “technological age” any more than anyone else in history, and we need to rethink, *revise* what we mean by *technology* if we want it to be the “realm of revealing, i.e., of truth” (p. 12).

Heidegger's (1977) connection of the essence of technology with the fine arts and his emphasis on it providing "an opening up" (p. 13) of the world call to mind some of the discussions in Manovich's (2001) *The Language of New Media*, particularly as they change the way we look at the world and our representations of it. Properly understood by teachers and students alike, incorporating these "new media" forms in schools might even return us to the old *techne*, to understanding technology as Heidegger's "way of revealing" the world rather than a way of mastering it.

The relatively fixed nature of media until the computer age is one of the many things changed with the advent of what Manovich (2001) calls "new media." These new media objects are generally represented numerically (p. 27), modular (p. 30), partially automated (p. 32), variable (p. 36), and potentially transcoded (p. 45), and since they are inextricably tied to the computer, they are interactive to a degree no "old" media form can even approach. The result is a new world full of media with very few roots, with very few strings attached. Many elements in new media, from order of experience to color to size, etc., even seem almost free-floating, which helps inspire us to discuss new media works as "virtual." To use the example of hypermedia, a document or artistic work that used to be bound on paper or canvas or film and arranged in a "hard-wired" (Manovich, 2001, p. 38) order can now be barely physical at all, represented numerically in computer storage, and also experienced in a variety of orders and formats. The audience for such a piece can follow any number of "hyperlinks" (p. 38) to other documents or elements of documents, rather than read from one page to the next or watch a film from the first frame to the last, effectively re-creating the document to some extent each time it is experienced.

The obvious temptation in studying new media is to see it as some sort of Heideggerian (1977) nightmare in which the whole world is more effectively reduced to pieces waiting to be manipulated, in which we are finally “lord of the earth” (p. 27), looking at nature completely as “an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectlessness of standing-reserve” (p. 17). Indeed, this does sometimes seem to be the case; easily falsified photographs and documents through programs like Photoshop are common examples of uses of new media that seem to be far more acts of “concealing” than “revealing.” And as for man being reduced himself to “standing-reserve,” is there any better example than the notion of “friends” being reduced to images and text to be stockpiled and counted on a MySpace page?

However, just as Heidegger says himself (inspired by Holderlin’s poetry), “in technology’s essence roots and thrives the saving power” (1977, p. 29), not just danger. For one, the fact that we can turn a river into little more than a source of electric power does not mean that we have to do so; likewise, though we can reduce our relationships to cell phone calls, emails, text messages, and MySpace contacts, we certainly do not have to. In fact, these new abilities of manipulation are just technology’s next step, as Heidegger uses the term, and ought to inspire the kinds of “questioning” that hopefully do lead to “revealing.” As he puts it, when confronted with the dangers of “the coming to presence of technology”: “everything, then, depends upon this: that we ponder this arising and that, recollecting, we watch over it” (p. 32). In other words, we must pay close attention to what technology does, since our human “dignity lies in keeping watch over the unconcealment” (p. 32).

In fact, new media may actually bring us closer to the idea of technology as a “revealing,” if we use it for this purpose, since its fragmented, rootless nature can draw attention to the potentially artificial aspects of things produced by technology, to their “enframing” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 19), which was much harder to see before. Mark B. N. Hansen (2004) says that new media “explodes the frame,” and that “digital data is at heart polymorphous” (p. 35), which means that each of us can take on a more active role as a “selective processor of information” (p. 22). To put it another way, perhaps the ease of manipulation and variability offered by new media can help us *revise* the parts of our world they affect, remind us that a photograph of me on MySpace or Facebook is not actually me, that air conditioning is not the weather, and that no matter how powerful a form of expression it is, a film should not be confused with life as we live it. The more transparently artificial, “enframed” nature of new media, if we will study it carefully, ought to allow us to better question the world around us in the hopes that it will “reveal” its “fundamental characteristic” (p. 27) to us. Only in this way can our schools truly enjoy “meaningful use of technology.”

Rather than unquestioningly advocate new technology for our students, as our politicians tend to do, or summarily dismiss it from the classroom, as many more “traditional” educators tend to do, we should explore it and question it at every turn—we should constantly *revise* it—as a way of “revealing” knowledge about our world and each other, since in that respect teachers and technology share a common goal. And with the introduction of new media into the classroom (hypertext editions of literature, virtual tours, digital film and photography, etc.), we may be better equipped than at any other time to evaluate technology with our students, since a “virtual” world, if recognized as

such and used accordingly, can provide a powerful and yet low-stakes opportunity to investigate man's various attempts at "bringing-forth" (p. 10), by participating in such actions in a way that does not directly affect the world around us (the popular SIMS series is a good example). Maybe a student who can reduce, compress, distort, rearrange, tear apart, and recombine "virtual" aspects of our world, under careful guidance and constant questioning, will be better equipped to understand the various connective, intertwined relationships in the world he finds when he leaves the computer.

### **Whose Space?**

There is some danger, though, in the abstraction that comes with new media and the digitization of nearly everything, and our students now more than ever need our help with interpreting, or "reading" these new texts all around us. This issue is explored in Julie Webber's (2003) *Failure to Hold*, a book which discusses at length some of the worst casualties of a world in which young people seem to have increasing trouble interpreting and participating in the texts around them. In schools, where these skills ought to be taught to the next generation of writers and readers, Webber finds that too often we deny students the "necessary skills that will enable them to function in a democratic society" (p. 2). A democratic society is by nature one of disagreement, contention, protest, argument—of interpretation, communication, and expression. However, fearing these things from youth it does not understand, adult leadership, particularly the kind of government that insists on standardization and "no tolerance" policies, opts to pursue "containment" (p. 3) rather than exploration and discussion. According to Webber, when students find no place to express conflict in a closed, rote classroom, they move into the only (relatively) open social areas they know, "the



hallways, the cafeteria, or the library” (p. 3). Or, these days, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, text messages, etc. And sometimes, when the case is bad enough, the frustration that results from this atmosphere erupts in violence.

Webber asserts that for young people, “the student body is their version of society” (2003, p. 8), a statement that should not surprise us. After all, so much of the idea of public school is built on this very principle, that students should learn and practice things adults do (well, some of them) in order to be ready to do them for “real” when they get older. Each year, the responsibilities, freedoms, and knowledge depth theoretically increase, producing a full-grown, prepared citizen upon graduation. To get there, Webber’s ideal school would be a kind of “holding environment” for students that “helps them understand why they should or should not do certain things or engage in certain behaviors” (p. 152). In this school, children must be allowed to “test the morality of the parents and the society, and the society must ‘hold’ firm in its position as this occurs” (p. 152). The atmosphere would be much like John Dewey’s “laboratory, where practices, ideas, and emotions are tested without fear of punishment or consequences” (p. 154). When students are denied this opportunity to test their society and themselves, not the other way around, the results can be dire, and sometimes tragic. To use the example of my own school, perhaps we should teach and explore MySpace and other networking sites at school rather than simply punishing students with a mandatory 2 days of ISS for visiting them with computers on school grounds.

Our current society’s ever-increasing fascination with digital technology makes this “holding environment” especially important. While technology has made our lives easier and better in numerous important ways, it has also sometimes exacerbated the

distance between us; rather than talk in person, we email, or text-message each other. This distance began growing some time ago with television, which “*overcomes* distance and separation; but it can do so only because it also *becomes* separation” (S. Weber, 1996, p. 116). But this separation is now so ubiquitous we often do not notice it, and we are now living in an America where nearly every interaction—now *interface*—has changed: we can, without going to too much trouble, shop for clothes and groceries, go to college, manage relationships with friends and family, work, fall in love, and fight a war from a distance. We do not really even have to leave *home*, if we do not want to. And if we do leave, we can still do many of these things from a handy digital device in our pockets, ensuring that we can avoid almost all actual human contact, if we so desire.

Such an environment makes it even harder for the young to participate in the traditional discussions and formal writing exercises that characterize our language arts classes in particular. And since we refuse, in today’s curriculum, to engage the new media texts that are so much a part of students’ personal lives, our young people struggle to communicate in that world as well, forced to find their own way. Add to that the growing emphasis on methods and knowledge in schools that seem farther and farther from being grounded in real experience (standardized testing, unreal expectations, few employable skills, decreased privileges), and we have quite a recipe for disaster. They need, rather than containment and statistics, some free room to develop, push some limits, test some boundaries, practice “writing” who they are—which perhaps explains the current networking-sites phenomenon.

If, as Webber (2003) attests, our school policies continue to make sure students are ill-equipped to deal with the incredibly complex “virtual” world we throw at them

more and more, we can expect from them “more violence in the future” (p. 12). Michael Corneal, for one, may just be a young man who “got the codes for conduct confused and chose the wrong practice to mimic” (p. 29), copying the fantasy shooting scene from *The Basketball Diaries* rather than the behavior of responsible, successful, productive role models in his community; accounts from those who witnessed the shooting call him “detached” (p. 28)—not angry, or hurt, or frustrated, or any other emotional state we might expect to be connected to such an action in the world outside of that high school. He was seen not yelling or crying as he shot his classmates, but putting plugs in his ears to possibly reproduce the muted sound effects of the fantasy sequence in the film (p. 27). Could a better “holding environment” and more current media literacy studies in the curriculum have saved those lives? Perhaps not; it’s at least hard to say. But it sure seems like a place to start.

### **Good News for the Ill**

Speaking of beginnings, my own interest in “ill communications” began in 1998, as a college junior, and my experience with new technologies showed both the possibilities and difficulties of making them a bigger part of the curriculum. I was certainly no “digital native”; I never cared much for computers or video games as a kid, and I only learned to type as a senior in high school. But as an English literature major I returned to the work of a poet I discovered in high school, William Blake, and found when I *revised* that work that it not only held up well in the computer age, but also that it seemed to be *made* for it. Various efforts to digitize the few remaining original copies of Blake’s “illuminated books” allowed us to study the numerous *revisions* of his

considerable and interconnected creative work in ways simply not available to students before fast computer processors and the World Wide Web.

Inspired by the possibilities I found in humanities computing, I learned to write in HTML (hypertext markup language) and returned to this interest in graduate school. In the spring of 2001, I completed *William Blake's "The Everlasting Gospel": A Hypertext Edition*, which served as my thesis project for a Master's degree in English from the University of Georgia. The work is a web-based and published (Owen, Jr., 2001) study of the poet's collected verse musings on Jesus Christ, running roughly 400 html pages in bulk (*length* is not really the right word in this case). The hypertext edition is non-linear, unfocused, fragmentary, characterized by a multiplicity of connective threads, and offers no definitive or even recommended reading of the "poem"; in short, it is nearly the opposite of the traditional literary study. In fact, rather than focus intently on one particular aspect of an author's work, as conventional scholarship does, it spirals ever outward *from* Blake, grabbing, exploring, or sometimes just lightly brushing anything he mentions in "The Everlasting Gospel," acting like Walt Whitman's "Noiseless Patient Spider" (1892/1993), flinging filament to expand its soul.

I took this approach to "The Everlasting Gospel" not only because Blake himself was a multimedia, dense, figurative, referential artist, but also because what is called "The Everlasting Gospel" was never actually finished or published by Blake himself. It was rather pieced together from Blake's journals by some of English literature's most renowned scholars. However, the scholars themselves had a terrible time deciding what should be included and what should not, and since it takes very little study of the "poem" to see that its pieces are quite rough and heterogeneous, I decided I would be doing a

disservice to continue the practice of finishing Blake's work for him. If those sketches could speak to us still, I wanted them to speak for themselves as much as possible, including as little of my own voice as I could, and hypertext gave me a way to do that. The basic idea was to link each piece ever considered part of "The Everlasting Gospel" to every other piece in such a way that anyone interested in studying the work could do so with or without the filter of those scholars, free to jump from any piece to any other piece—and also free to study the pieces in a different arrangement each time. In other words, to study the work in this way is to see its complex nature, and to keep that complexity intact. And since the idea was to *avoid* telling people how to read these fragments from Blake, I offered various annotations from various sources, links to other relevant sites on the Internet, and digital copies of artwork depicting characters and stories referred to by Blake—some in Blake's own hand. In short, since Blake never finished "The Everlasting Gospel," I wanted to make it available for endless *revision*.

I found this work interesting and often fun, and loved the experimental feel of doing something new, and the excitement of stitching together so many disparate pieces, but it was not all easy—for a variety of reasons. In addition to the difficulty of learning a computer language and the exhausting hours of coding HTML, all of it nearly went to waste. Though I began this project in the fall of 1998 and worked the next few years under the tutelage of Nelson Hilton, a renowned Blake scholar himself, I ran into some unforeseen difficulties when I turned my work in to the graduate school for approval. I expected a simple "check off" since my department had approved the project; however, I soon knew things would not go so smoothly when I heard the slightly irritated tone of the message from the graduate school on my answering machine, requesting a meeting. It

turns out that the University had not accepted work like this before, and was not quite prepared to now. For example, because UGA had traditionally insisted that thesis projects be preserved on paper, bound, and stored on a shelf, the head of the graduate school assumed my work was, as he called it, “desktop publishing,” and tried to print it. However, the site is made up of numerous frames, and many of them contain numerous hyperlinks to other pages both inside and outside of the text; it was designed to be the kind of text that can only really exist digitally. Six hours and thousands of mostly useless pages later, his office assistants cut off the printers and left me the angry message. After nearly an hour of tense discussion and explanation and at least one consultation from the building’s technical assistant, we finally all agreed that while my work lived and breathed online, it could be preserved on a CD at the school—probably still filed on a shelf.

Though I had not been prepared to defend my work in quite this way, I eventually realized what an interesting and difficult time in history I was living and working in, having used one of the University’s first student email addresses as a freshman and having participated in a pretty radical way of studying literature as a senior and graduate student without recognizing how novel these changes were, or how they might affect curriculum in the future. I imagine many of the old guard, in education and elsewhere, must have felt a little like the title characters in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) when swept along by the first big wave of the Internet age. One of the most interesting parts of Stoppard’s absurd treatment of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is the way that the world befuddles Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; though they do not move much, the world changes around them—in terms of both physical and figurative setting—faster than they can keep up, and rules, roles, motivations, desires, and politics

all fluctuate without their permission, participation, or (often) recognition. What is worse, they are frequently mocked by the Player, of course, because he has seen the lines, written some of them, and knows “which way the wind is blowing” (p. 66).

All of us can sympathize with Stoppard’s characters to some extent; lately it has become a wide, weird (virtual?) world out there, and few of us are sure how to play its games anymore, if they are even the same games, if they are even games at all. It likely seemed like progress when technology made the factory worker’s job easier (and the factory cooler or warmer, depending on the season), but how are we to feel about replacing him at that job with a giant robotic arm? We also celebrated the wider sharing of information, but how do we swim the current flood of data, and whose life raft do we grab onto? In the case of my work on Blake, while I felt (feel) that a hypertext edition is the *best* way to study “The Everlasting Gospel,” I can also understand why it looked so strange to the graduate school, and why such things might cause no small amount of apprehension about what digitizing texts might mean to people who have always thought of our studies of the world as things that might be squeezed neatly between two covers and stored nicely on a shelf. I understand, too, why email—to say nothing of text messages or twitter—might trouble people who grew up appreciating the care, effort, and personal touch of handwritten letters.

So when do these new digital communications technologies make us ill (cool), and when do they just make us ill (not cool)? That is not only a big question in curriculum today, and maybe *the* big question in language arts and humanities study, but it is also exactly what we should be figuring out as curriculum studies scholars and teachers—*with* our students, not just *for* them. I thought my Blake project was ill, and so

did the graduate school—but we didn't mean the same thing, and had a tough time agreeing on its merits. If the school had simply stuck with the policy in place, designed for a world we no longer live in, would anything have been gained? Would I, or Blake, or the graduate school, or curriculum have been better off? And yet, I will be the first to admit that if I had studied another poet or writer, I likely would have found the old ways to be the best ways, and the conventional paper the best way to express my ideas.

What we need, then, are what I call *filters*, or experts in all kinds of communications and expressions, who like Tom Stoppard's *Player* (1967) can feel comfortable even as the world around them changes; we need curriculum scholars, teachers, and students who constantly *revise* our methods of communication as more and more digital text gadgets emerge, who can choose appropriate "communication skills" for each context and situation. In the digital age, it will be these *Players*, these *filters*, whose voices will ring out above the growing textual cacophony, who will be comfortable using a variety of texts, digital or otherwise, to effectively navigate our world of new and constantly changing communication technologies. This need for *filters* is, perhaps more than any other reason, why literary study can still be so important to the curriculum—with *revision*. In fact, to appropriate the final statement from Percy Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" (1840/1977), these *Players*, like Shelley's poets, or those who are most expert at the game of language—no matter what digital form that language takes—will be "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." And though now just as then some of us will be better *Players*, or *filters*, than others, if each man and woman does not learn at least to some degree the skills of these *filters*, to become skillful in a variety of new games in addition to the old ones, we risk a world full of communication technologies owned by



people who find it increasingly hard to talk to each other. If we do not learn the trade of Stoppard's *Player*, we will likely find ourselves as lost as his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

As curriculum studies theorists, we must recognize that despite the importance of texts today, literature and language curriculum in the conventional sense is currently in a precarious position in the digital age. For one, it is largely old, white, bound, and dead, literally and figuratively, in a new, Technicolor, free world that is born again almost daily. It seems to steadily lose ground in the struggle for the student's attention and appreciation, crowded out by the growing multitude of sleek and spectacular media, the speed of which is often the only thing blowing the dust off many of our book jackets these days. In short, the book—at least in school—is closed just when it needs to be open. If language arts and humanities classes are to be valuable parts of our curriculum today, when textual skills are perhaps more important than they have ever been, they will probably have to change, be *revised*, to include many of the things that we have so far decided would bring about their ruin. But if they do undergo *revision*, they just might become vital, important sites for exploring many of curriculum studies' most important “questions concerning technology,” to appropriate Heidegger (1977).

For example, a student using hypertext can become a kind of reader/writer who can step off the beaten path, follow alternate routes, pursue new relationships in all directions, producing a kind of *literature unbound* that says “yes” to all it touches. Though flexibility may vary some according to type, purpose, etc. (poetry may prove more dynamic than novels, for example), hypertext editions of some works, like Blake's “The Everlasting Gospel,” may allow the reader/writer to “choose the ending” (J. H.

Miller, 1999, p. 131), and maybe even the beginning and middle, of the act of experiencing a text. These kinds of digital-technology-mediated studies might not only renew interest in old texts and make studying them easier for students today, but comfort and skill with hypertext and other new digital texts among our students might also help them see the world as a place still open to our participation and influence, “never being in quite finished form”; rather than passive receivers of an inherited, rigid world, they might come to see themselves as its editors, knowing that each text we write is “just one stage in a potentially endless process of revision, deletion, addition, and rearrangement” (p. 97).

We who work in curriculum studies today have a great responsibility to shape a curriculum that will teach students the literacy they will need to prosper in a world that looks much different than the one in which we grew up. And while the films we have begun to more regularly include in our classrooms across the curriculum are great starting points for introducing new media texts to our students, they are just a starting point; after all, film has been followed in its century-old history by explosions in television, popular music, advertising, and myriad digital text experiences, some of which we do not even have good names for yet, much less clear ways to include in the curriculum. When I began college in 1995, just fifteen years ago, I did not even know anyone who had an email account or a cell phone—the two primary ways high school students communicate today. The ways we communicate with each other have changed, and are changing, and our curriculum should engage those changes, not ignore them. As Kellner and Share correctly point out, it would be “highly irresponsible” to ignore the media culture’s new “forms of socialization and education” (p. 371), and if we hold onto our old

understanding of curriculum—particularly in language arts study—too long, our students stand to lose more than just their interest in our classes.

It is true that the “great questions of the present century remain basic humanities questions” (Schwarz, 2003, p. 47)—email is nothing, after all, without the very human lives lived on each side of the “send” button—but if we do not bring media literacy into our curriculum significantly and quickly, we may not be really giving our students a chance to answer those questions for themselves anymore. If it is true that our communication is “ill,” I hope we can one day say it like the Beastie Boys (1994) do. And if we want that to happen, we need to make the choices of responsible educators, and learn to speak the languages of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so that we can teach them.

## *Chapter 10*

### **The Word Is Dead; Long Live the Word: Literature in the Digital Age**

*“It was still raining. A few letter-writers had taken refuge in doorways, their old voiceprinters wrapped in sheets of clear plastic, evidence that the written word still enjoyed a certain prestige here. It was a sluggish country.”*

(Gibson, 1984, p. 88)

#### **The Storm of the Century**

“In the beginning was the Word,” the Christian apostle John said, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1). Indeed, many religious faiths tell of deities speaking the world into existence, of gods-as-authors, and even those faiths that do not only come into power and relevance as a way of understanding the human condition through storytelling of some sort. But in our digital age, long after Nietzsche famously declared that “*God is dead!*” (1911/1999, p. 3, his italics), is it possible that the word is dead, too? Are we gradually replacing our traditional, written world for a “finely filamented electronic scrim,” an enveloping, multimedia virtual film constantly generated by our exponentially proliferating digital marvels, as Sven Birkerts (1994, p.5) says? Is it true that all of these things have “taken the weight out of words on a page” (Tabbi & Wutz, 1997, p. 1), and maybe words altogether?

Or could it just be that the word is dead in a certain way of thinking about the word, just as Nietzsche argued that God was dead in a certain way of thinking about God? After all, Nietzsche said God was dead a hundred years ago, and yet the world is still a place in which religious faiths enjoy enormous influence. And anyway, Nietzsche “said” God was dead in a book, with words, nicely paralleling John’s statement that God

is alive, with words (the Word, in fact); William Gibson (1984) had his narrator in *Neuromancer* condescendingly call those who still held onto the written word “sluggish”—but he did so *in a book*; and here I am, *writing a paper* (well, typing) about whether or not doing things like *writing papers* is “dead,” quoting a bunch of other *writers*, like Birkerts and Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz, who weigh in on this discussion *with books*, some of them pretty long ones. I feel a little like I’m having one of my recurring debates with my high school students about whether science or literature/language is the more important course of study; I always win on a technicality of sorts, of course—they still can’t convince me science matters more without using words, and therefore proving me right.

But even if I can argue confidently with my students about the importance of words in the curriculum, now and in the future, I am not nearly so certain about what those words will look like, especially in the case of literature. For example, some arguments that literature will, for the most part, look and feel like it always has, that content will matter most, are pretty convincing—and so are some that say literature in the digital age will be something completely new, and that the medium is what really matters. It also seems sometimes like most of the voices in these discussions about digital literature can be separated into two big camps I don’t want to join, like the jock/nerd wars of the digital literary world. Many sound like Birkerts in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), wishing we could go backwards into some stuffy, snooty, literary-neverland past before computers ruined everything; others, like Janet H. Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), seem like they can’t wait until the whole literary world turns into one big game of dungeons and dragons, where life is a Star Trek fantasy with no ending. I love literature,

and I hope they are both wrong about what is to come. I also feel like if we are going to go forward in this discussion, we are going to need to arrive at some clearer agreement on what terms like “interactive,” “text,” “hypertext,” “cybertext,” “hypermedia,” “nonlinear,” and even “technology” mean—and hopefully do so without running off the last few people who even want to read literature anymore. And perhaps nothing at this point is such a headache-starter as trying to figure out the writer/reader relationship in our digital future. In short, it looks like digitization might mean everything about literature, and literature class, and the curriculum in general, needs *revision*.

All of this, I must confess, makes me a little dizzy, and wary, and excited all at once, like when a powerful storm is approaching. And maybe that is exactly as it should be. The swirl of forces we see developing in our increasingly digital age is complex and unpredictable, and so trying to predict the future of the word, especially in curriculum, is much like trying to predict the weather. Who will be hit hardest? How bad will it be? Am I in the storm’s path, or not? None of us, really, knows for sure how the details will work out. However, there may still be patterns worth noticing and watching, some signs of order within what looks like chaos—what Benoit Mandelbrot calls “fractals” (1983)—and if we pay attention enough to the right forces, we may just find ourselves prepared for whatever may come in the word world whirled.

Henry Jenkins (2006) probably has it right when he says “welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (p. 2). In short, it seems that in the near future we are likely to have in the curriculum both books and things that are not much like

books at all; we will likely still have the various permutations of the word that we are used to, as well as numerous new ones. We will still publish, write, read, and teach the word, though we may do and experience all of those things in different ways. We may even like the changes; publishing veteran Jeff Gomez (2008) goes so far as to say that “pages are cages, trapping words within boundaries” (p. 14) and wonders if letting print die or at least lose its stranglehold on words might actually set them free. Whatever the case, it looks like while the word will not be broken, it will be changed—not “fractured” so much as “fractaled.”

Meteorologist Edward Lorenz discovered in the 1960s why we should be a little easier on the local weather forecaster: “everything in the vast dynamical system we call weather is connected by feedback to everything else” (Briggs, 1992, p. 59). In the most clichéd example, people often claim that a butterfly’s wings in China can affect weather patterns here. In other words, weather works on a collection of *feedback* loops, in which every behavior of the system (the beating butterfly wings) in turn becomes input for the system and produces some other behavior, and what results from these *feedback* loops is often not very easy to predict—even kids know butterflies are hard to catch, so it’s no surprise their parents have trouble accounting for them scientifically. Last winter, we experienced a great example of weather’s unpredictability here in Augusta, Georgia. The forecasters warned of a coming, sure-thing snowstorm, in March no less. Since we get practically no snow at all here each year, the reactions were varied and often extreme. Some said the reports of a virtually-guaranteed 4-to-6 inches of snow were ridiculous and loudly told everyone to ignore them; others stocked up on provisions for something out of that *Day After Tomorrow* (2004) film, where New York becomes the Arctic and everyone

dies. Others, especially the young ones among us, just looked for makeshift sleds, since school was already cancelled for the day the storm was going to hit.

The result: by my count, at least 3 snowflakes fell gently and magically onto the same stone in my backyard, just outside my window, and disappeared instantly. Maybe I dreamed them; it seems the sure-thing storm took a last-minute sharp turn north, and missed us almost entirely. On the other hand, Atlanta was buried, and Athens, 90 miles away, looked like a Christmas card come to life. Elsewhere, Savannah, a few hours south of here, might have been mildly interested, at best, in the weather patterns that only seem to affect its distant neighbors in the northern part of the state. To expand the perspective a little, New York and New England probably laughed at us as inexperienced, ignorant rubes, if they were even watching. I bet Hawaii went to the beach and cared not at all. The point of countless stories like this one is that sometimes storms blow over, or around, or dissipate entirely—and sometimes adults do all the worrying while young people play. Sometimes, though, we get Katrina—or at least somebody does, since storms don't hit everywhere at once in the same way. And the situation with the word in the digital age is much the same; some parts of the curriculum, some kinds of publishing, writing, reading, and teaching of words, may in fact see not much of anything change, and others may discover too late that the storm is very real and is coming right for them. But let us not forget that even New Orleans, despite Katrina, is still around. Maybe both John the apostle and Nietzsche will make it, too, if a little changed, a little *revised*.

No matter how they feel about the details of our swirling, monstrous digital storm in the literary world, or whether they fear or welcome its arrival, many writers recognize the *feedback* loops that will increasingly come to characterize our fractal world of words.



Birkerts (1994), for example, provides evidence that to some degree it has always been this way, that our reading experience is always “complicated by the feedback loop” (p. 98) since our real lives are affected by what we read, and how we think about what we read is affected by our real lives. And, speaking of the old world of words, William Paulson (1997) says much the same thing when discussing our hallowed literary canon, which he calls “a form of cultural feedback operating with very long time constants” (p. 245); what we read is in the canon, and what’s in the canon is what we read, neither of which has changed much in a long time. Indeed, sometimes it looks like tiny details might change everything, and other times these loops look almost circular and stable. In weather terms, storms are pretty hard to predict, but we can be pretty confident that it will be hot in Georgia in August.

It could be that our new digital way of experiencing the word world just speeds up, perhaps exponentially, the kinds of processes that have so far been operating much less noticeably, or over longer periods of time. For example, each new literary school of thought and criticism has read *Hamlet* in a different way, even if we all still read *Hamlet*. Though we in the western world have read that same text for roughly 400 years, it has not always been the same text each time, serving as a *feedback* loop with time and place and way of life as variables changing the way that text looks over the years. Interestingly, it was hard for us to see the fractals and *feedback* loops all around us (like the weather) until computers vastly increased the calculation powers and information storage and retrieval capacities available to us—and now these same machines are increasing the numbers of fractals and *feedback* loops in our world, as the example of the word shows us. As Espen J. Aarseth (1997) and others point out, what he calls “cybertext,” or the

kind of dynamic, usually-computer-mediated texts we have today that allow at least some creative powers to the reader, “must contain some kind of information feedback loop” (p. 19), since the reader instantly changes the text in the act of reading it.

This kind of text has the potential, according to some, to manage the “cycle’s completion, so that the feedback loops run in both directions” (Hayles, 2008, p. 83) from writer to reader and back again. N. Katherine Hayles, though she allows the point Birkerts (1994) and others make about the effect on the print text of the reader’s perceptions, asserts that in digital texts the words on the “page” can “literally change in response to the user’s perceptions” (p. 83), making each of these texts a much more unpredictable, dynamic system in constant flux, with little digital butterfly wings at every turn, constantly affecting the ways we publish, write, read, and teach. If Gomez (2008) is right, and “pages are cages” (p. 14), what will our words do if we let them out?

### **Publishing is Dead; Long Live Publishing**

William Gibson, the author whose famous work *Neuromancer* (1984) gave us the term “cyberspace,” envisions in that work a future world in which entertainment is almost completely drug-induced or hologram-mediated and the word is almost non-existent, or at least obsolete, as his mention of the old-fashioned writers huddling in doorways shows us. Aside from person-to-person communications, the only time the word seems really important in Gibson’s book is when Case is told that he has to learn the name of the AI “demon” in order to set it free and complete his mission. Otherwise, the real power belongs to the “cowboy” of cyberspace, like Case, who is able to project his “disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix” (p. 5), or the great network of valuable information that makes both the virtual and the real

worlds turn. The matrix Gibson describes sounds like an extreme sci-fi form of the Internet, only without so much graphics interface and reliance on text. In such a code-based world, it is hard to imagine anyone curling up with a good book—or even a hypertext novel, for that matter. Why read about Belgium when you can just jack your consciousness there?

Lucky for people who still like books, we are not there yet, even if that is where we are headed. However, even today, in a world in which the printed word is almost everywhere we look, many feel like the book is on its last legs, both in and outside school; in fact, Gomez (2008) boldly announces in the title of his recent work that *Print is Dead*. If Gomez were a Hollywood film executive, or a video game developer, we might be able to dismiss this as self-serving bias; however, Gomez is a novelist who now works for Holtzbrink Publishers, the people who own St. Martin's Press and Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Perhaps even more surprising is that his book does not share much of the sadness in tone that so characterizes Birkerts's *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), but rather seems hopeful, or at least interested, in what will come next, after the demise of the publishing industry as we know it.

Gomez (2008) points out that the times, simply, have changed, and people have, too; while many of us were raised on books and still love them, the same cannot often be said of the generation of “Digital Natives” growing up now, “accustomed to the entire world being only a mouseclick away” (p. 4). These kids, in contrast to their parents, often see print as “expensive, a bore and a waste of time” (p. 4)—and Gomez implies that to stick to a business model that insists on fighting this attitude is to choose to lose. Where the past few generations had the major networks, some favorite books, a record

player, and maybe a VCR, kids today have YouTube, online TV, and the iPod, among almost countless other digital wonders. In short, “the opportunities for entertainment have exploded” (p. 108), and book publishers are scrambling to remain in a game that suddenly has far more, and flashier, players. In addition, Gomez recognizes that “today’s shoppers want it *now*” (p. 111), a speed which seems to get a little faster all the time in the digital *feedback* loop, and this means that the old ways—the multi-year process of writing a book, finding a publisher, editing, marketing, shipping to bookstores, etc.—are just not going to be able to keep up.

The pain that book publishers are currently feeling, and will likely continue to feel until they adapt, is not limited to the book world, but is rather similar to the kind of pain being felt across the media spectrum. Big record store and record label corporations are dying, and TV and film powers as well are bemoaning the digital storm approaching, all of them crying out that we should all help defend them from the danger to come, and threatening legal action of various kinds if we don’t. But the pain they feel is in no small part deserved, and sometimes of their own doing; these previously wealthy and powerful entities are mostly bemoaning the loss of that wealth and power, but insisting that their primary interests are artistic, and that their loss is ours, too. From the earliest days of the printing press and other similar media dissemination technologies, a basic rule has held in the world of public arts: if you had money and resources, you made the rules.

While it has always been true that anyone with skill and desire could write, or make music, or act and perform, to “publish” or “do so publicly, on a large scale, and make a living at it” has been reserved for a lucky few. Those few were decided by the great gatekeepers of publishing, the entities with money and resources who turned *people*

*who write into writers, people who make music into musicians, people who make films into filmmakers, etc.* In this system, not only was the reading, listening, and viewing public forced to enjoy these things on the gatekeepers' release-date and air-time schedule and pay whatever price was demanded, but the rule-makers were often not kind to the artists whose work they made their living publishing—a tale told so often it has become cliché. They simply did not have to be kind, since they knew those artists could either do things the company way or not really at all, just as the public could wait and pay or miss out entirely. It is no wonder, then, that when digital technology allowed more access to the kinds of things so long hidden behind the gates, people—especially young people not used to the rules yet—jumped at the chance to get at them. Many people also know that these formerly powerful publishing entities are now mostly upset that the digital storm has broken down their gates (and therefore their bank accounts), and see that these companies are just worried they will not figure out how to build them back and close them again.

In terms of the word, though, things are not necessarily bad so much as different. Today, anyone with a computer and a fast Internet connection can digitally “publish” anything he wants, anytime he wants, any way he wants—and much the same thing is true for someone who makes music or films. And while doing so is certainly easier if an author has access to money and resources, not to mention a loyal audience, almost every aspect of publishing can now be undertaken by an individual artist. For example, he can charge for his work, or give it away for free. He can also advertise any way he wants, or not at all, and reap the benefits or suffer the consequences of his own independent artistic, and marketing, decisions. So, in some ways, what has changed in publishing is

not so much the word, but the business model that sells it and controls it, and the technology that delivers it.

Many people affected by these changes have realized, reluctantly or not, that when we are saddened at the possible death of books, it is mostly nostalgia for the delivery system that we feel; in some ways, we are like children who can't see the gift because we are fascinated by the box it came in. However, as is the case with most nostalgia, this love of the codex delivery system (the book as we know it) contains a large measure of ignor(e)ance, since that delivery system has been through changes before. As Sarah Sloane (2000) puts it, "books are as much delivery systems . . . as were clay tablets, papyrus rolls, parchment or vellum manuscripts, or even the damp walls of a dark cave" (p. 25). And just because we can deliver the digital word in new ways, does not necessarily mean the old systems will completely disappear. In fact, Aarseth says in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) that "the codex format is one of the most flexible and powerful information tools yet invented, with a capacity for change that is probably not exhausted yet" (p. 9).

Murray (1997) even argues that the computer "is not the enemy of the book," but is rather a logical next-step, "the child of print culture, a result of five centuries of organized, collective inquiry and invention that the printing press made possible" (p. 8). She also reminds us that it took years of experimentation after the printing press to establish conventions like paragraphs, chapters, and page numbers (p. 28); in other words, the word delivery system has been in flux before. George Landow (2006) adds that the difference between today's codex works and the kinds of texts available to

contemporaries of classic authors like “Plato, Vergil, or Augustine” are so great “that even to suggest that we share common experiences of reading misleads” (p. 99).

Despite the longevity and success of the codex, it was once new, as well, and probably shocking to those used to oral “publishing” or scrolls, and it has changed over the years. And even if the digital leap forward does seem just as “hyper” as the terminology suggests, book lovers everywhere should not give up hope yet: Loss Pequeno Glazier (2002) reminds us that “during the long transition from book rolls to codex, the roll and codex existed side by side for 400 years” (p. 165). In summary, we should not be surprised that the publishing world seems to be in disarray as the digital storm approaches, or that traditional book publishers are in fear of a less-profitable future; when storms blow up and gates blow down, things often get a little crazy until people find their bearings again.

### **Writing is Dead; Long Live Writing**

Of all the people in the word world who have to find their bearings in the digital storm, writers evoke the most sympathy. In some ways, it seems that they must make the greatest adjustments, and stand to lose nearly as much as the publishing companies now that the gates have come crashing down. For example, Gomez (2008) warns that authors from the old school, who “choose not to take part in any sort of online promotion or . . . otherwise engage an Internet audience in any meaningful way will find themselves at an increasing disadvantage” (p. 151). However, even if they do so, there are no guarantees of continued success; much of the audience authors will find online is used to getting things for free, and it is unclear so far how a digital readership will pay a writer’s very-much-analog bills. And there are other worries as well; in addition to Tabbi and Wutz’s

(1997) claims about the word's new weightlessness, there are plenty of people out there who lament the ephemeral character of the digital word. For example, Birkerts mentions in his *Elegies* (1994) the old argument that "to make a mark on a page is to gesture toward permanence" (157), and such permanence has sometimes seemed even to offer immortality of a sort. Today, though, Birkerts says that digital words "arrive onto the screen under the aspect of provisionality" since they can be "transferred with a stroke or deleted altogether" (p. 157)—a common complaint, and one familiar to anyone who has accidentally hit "delete" or failed to "save" an electronic document.

However, this idea of permanence, or even immortality, has always been a myth, or at least a metaphor. When I talk with my writing students about how putting something down on paper makes it more lasting, or permanent, I mean that it is more lasting than, say, thinking it, or saying it once out loud. And even then, if the paper gets thrown away soon after, the difference between writing things down and not writing them down isn't much. And this is true even for great writers of all kinds; plenty of people have enjoyed popularity and respect for a time, only to see it fade and their work forgotten, and far more have been forgotten than remembered after death. Sometimes historians discover in old texts "embarrassing examples of the claim of immortality made for works that did not survive" (Bolter, 2001, p. 163). One perfect example is Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818/1977) a poem about just such a situation, in which an ancient, broken statue is discovered of a king long dead, whose inscription of "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" (line 11) now provokes not fear but laughter, since the statue is in ruins, and the ruins sit in an empty desert. Shelley, even though his work has survived thus far, further demonstrates his understanding of how tenuous the power



and relevance of one's words can be in "Ode to the West Wind" (1820/1977). In this poem, he asks the wind to "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!" (lines 63-64), though his choice of metaphor (dead leaves stay dead) and ending question ("can Spring be far behind?") suggest that he is none too sure that anything lasting is available to him, "incantation" of his verse (line 65) or no.

Nobody gets to live forever, and neither can words be made "permanent"; even when they do survive, they are often misunderstood, anyway (I bet John the Apostle could tell us a thing or two about that). On the other hand, there are plenty of interesting things that the digital world can do for writers in the here and now, and perhaps we would be better served focusing on those. For example, Glazier (2002) argues in *Digital Poetics* that for poets the new conditions are perhaps the most promising, since "what has expanded are the materials with which one can work" (p. 1). Paul Lake (2001) even says that "a poem in its early stages resembles the chaotic random activity of a storm, organizing itself through a rule-governed process of self-adjustment and feedback" (p. 163), which suggests that perhaps poetry has been waiting centuries now for just this digital, fractal moment. In fact, one of Glazier's (2002) favorite aspects of the word in the new digital storm is its "lack of fixity," since a computer language like HTML "proposes a provisional or conditional text" (p. 15) that could allow "architectural, metalinguistic, and conceptual spaces for poetic improvisation" (p. 112). Far from being worried about the future of the writer in the digital age, he points out that "the electronic world is a world substantially of writing" (p. 31) in which the "author" can be more than we have imagined, now including roles like "programmer" as well as "typesetter, graphic artist, and director of the work" (p. 29). Glazier imagines a near future full of both

traditional print poetry and also “multi-layered, dense, interrelated webs” that are “not reproducible in the previous medium” (p. 137).

In short, “the digital medium has reinvigorated the idea of the writer as maker” (Glazier, 2002, p. 29)—and we should notice the *re-* in the “reinvigorated” part of that quote. William Blake, who “combined word and image in his self-produced books” (p. 23) in intricate and unique ways, looks now to have been about 200 years ahead of his time—or maybe just many iterations ago of the *feedback* loop; Stephanie Strickland says that “his poems, made from the interaction of full-scale drawings, patterns intertwined with text, and calligraphic gestures, could not be interpreted by conventions developed to understand print” (2001, p. 107). David Bindman (2000) points out that Blake hoped to “liberate all writers” by devising a way for the “artist to work on a book from start to finish” without outside intervention, allowing this “author-artist to pass on his vision of liberation to the world without the mediation of those hostile to that vision” (pp. 7-8).

Blake’s work as it exists is a fascinating blend of inspired visual and verbal expression, and who knows what he might have done with the powerful digital, multimedia tools available today; it is certainly interesting to see what new curricular possibilities we have found in it (Owen, Jr., 2001) by using those new tools. Jay David Bolter (2001) says that the “electronic writing space is inclusive, open to multiple systems of representation” (p. 36), and Hayles (2008) also recognizes that, like Blake long before the storm, “electronic literature challenges us to rethink what literature, and the literary, can do and be” (p. 42). Landow (2006) concurs, and disagrees with those who say that writers “do not design well” (p. 86), pointing out that though “beginners in any field” often do a “fairly poor quality job at a new activity” (p. 87), that is hardly

reason to abandon the activity altogether. We may have very few new William Blake's so far, but that is only *so far*.

And besides, Blake was not alone in his interest in expanding the notion of what writing could mean. For example, many theorists working with digital literature have noticed a perhaps surprising forefather in William Faulkner. Gomez (2008) recalls Faulkner's interest in having each character's narration in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) "represented by a different color ink" (p. 125), and Murray (1997) says he was interested in a similar strategy for the Benji section of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and also points out that he included a map of his fictional Yoknapatawpha County in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), labeled with characters and events from numerous novels (pp. 256-257). Though these kinds of ideas were generally rejected by editors at the time, all of these strategies might help today's readers live a little more in Faulkner's fictional world of words, and they are all much easier to accomplish in digital literature. Jo Alyson Parker (1997) even says Faulkner used fractal structures and *feedback* loops long before we had computers to analyze them, pointing out that *Absalom* "provides a fruitful area for exploring the way a meaning structure emerges out of an apparently chaotic flux," since "Sutpen's story itself demonstrates the so-called butterfly effect" or the "development of small causes into great effects" (p. 101). As is the case in many hypertext works today, Parker finds in *Absalom* that "with its multiperspectival, nonlinear structure, it resists overdetermination, or at least relishes the unpredictable response" (p. 105).

### **Reading is Dead; Long Live Reading**

Despite Faulkner's apparent fondness for the "unpredictable response," this idea is quite a contentious topic of discussion in the world of digital fiction, or fictional works

constructed with, and meant to be experienced with, computers. Some writers and theorists claim that this type of fiction's most common structuring tool, the hypertext link, dramatically changes the relationship between author and reader, since it "offers the reader a new literary experience in which she can share control of the text with the author" (Bolter, 2001, p. 122); in other words, the reader often gets to (and has to) choose what direction the story takes next. For Bolter, this means that "readers cannot avoid writing the text itself, because every choice they make is an act of writing" (p. 152). Michael Joyce (1996) agrees, saying that since readers of a hypertext "alter its form by their choices," hypertext "obviates these distinctions" between writer and reader (p. 19). In his own *afternoon*, Joyce hoped through hypertext to "write a novel that would change in successive readings" (p. 31) to an extent not possible in print, and his work is considered a landmark in digital fiction.

However, Aarseth (1997) does not agree that the reader has become significantly more powerful in the digital age, pointing out that in some ways a "hypertext path with only one (unidirectional) link between text chunks is much more authoritarian and limiting" (p. 47) than a print book in which the reader may skip about the text in any manner and at any time he pleases. For that matter, Aarseth is also not sure about hypertext's claims to being a "nonlinear" alternative to the codex; he argues that the old codex form "can be opened at any page and can be started at any point," which makes it more "random access" than "linear," as it is commonly called (p. 46). Aarseth does seem to have a point, since even a hypertext reader who gets to make a choice between a couple of options does not get to choose the options completely; someone (the author) had to program those links before the reader could click them, after all. And we have all

skipped pages or chapters of a book here and there, or peeked ahead to the end—and some books, like anthologies and other collections, aren't even meant to be read in a “linear” way, despite the page numbering. This dissertation, for that matter, is structured in such a way that each chapter can be read more or less independently, even though they are numbered and arranged so as to produce a linear whole, *feedback* loops of topics and quotes and references notwithstanding. Even Bolter (2001) admits that in some ways hypertext only extends, or foregrounds, what reader-response theory has told us happens all the time: the author may write a story, but that story is substantially ours as soon as we actively read it, and only exists “moment to moment in the act of reading it” (p. 171). Or, as Sloane (2000) puts it, reading is already “a dynamic, transcendent, meaning-making activity negotiated through the gaps and indeterminacies of a text by the reader” (p. 76).

Besides, even if hypertext does offer readers new and useful powers, especially when those readers are students and those texts are especially allusive or otherwise difficult, it is far from clear so far in the case of hypertext fiction that this loosening of the reigns is good for the story. For one, even texts that mean to be “interactive” fall short because they “fail to truly make accommodations for the variety of reading responses and various understandings of the world readers bring to texts” (Sloane, 2000, p. 99)—that is, since authors cannot possibly imagine every reaction or desire of the reader when constructing digital fiction, it is practically impossible to give the reader the full title of “writer.” And when choices are made by the reader about the text, Aarseth (1997) echoes Robert Frost's “The Road Not Taken” (1916/1992) when he wonders if readers will be haunted by “inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard” (p. 3). In addition, Sloane (2000) says that new fictions so far do not measure up

artistically to their “old school” counterparts: “No hypertext fiction I have read, in my opinion, is of the quality of any great novel written in this century” (p. 127), Joyce’s *afternoon* included. He even goes so far as to say that his “best guess is that adding computers to the storytelling relationship will ultimately matter little in the long run” (p. 188). To Sloane, “stories are the basis of how we understand our world and how we explain it to others” (p. 7), and “a good story will always be a good story, regardless of its medium” (p. 188). And if the story is not a good story, no collection of digital bells and whistles will fix that.

Perhaps part of the problem for hypertext fictions is elucidated by Marie-Laure Ryan’s *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001), which depicts literature’s current split between the “avant-garde committed to the new aesthetic and a popular branch that remained faithful to the immersive ideals and narrative techniques of the nineteenth century” (p. 5). Ryan says that the “ultimate goal of art” is the reconciliation of these two approaches, the “synthesis of immersion and interactivity” (p. 12). This goal will certainly be a difficult one to reach in a single work of art, since interactivity requires the form of the work to be always present and visible to the reader, whereas immersion requires that form to disappear so that the reader can give in to the illusory world created by the author. As Ryan puts it, “we cannot experience both dimensions at the same time,” and yet we cannot completely choose one or the other since each type of literature “provides a point of view from which we can observe features that remain invisible from the other” (p. 199). Perhaps this is why the digital future currently looks more promising to writers of poetry than prose fiction; poetry has a long history of drawing attention to its form, but prose fiction relies much more on immersion into a storyworld. In either case,

though, giving the reader power of construction, inviting her to cross the “writer/reader” line wherever we decide it will end up, seems mostly like a gift unasked for; if I wanted to write my own stories or poems, I would. If the author has no particular vision to express in which every element must be in its place, is that still “poetry”? If the author has no particular story to tell, is that still “fiction”? If what I really wanted was a video game or MOO, it is unclear why I would seek out digital literature in the first place.

Besides, people like Birkerts (1994) make it seem like authors are giving up their mastery and *authority* when it comes to the word at exactly the wrong time, like a worker who goes on vacation just when he is in danger of being fired. Birkerts laments that not only the world of print, but of *reading* is passing, and uses as an illustration a painfully unsuccessful attempt to discuss Henry James with his students who “were not, with few exceptions, readers—never had been” (p. 19). He notes that increasingly, “as the world hurtles on toward its mysterious rendezvous, the old act of slowly reading a serious book becomes an elegiac exercise” (p. 6)—and if the author himself these days tells us that we can construct his text as well as he can, how soon will it be before the “elegiac exercise” is not undertaken at all? Following Birkerts’s book, it is easy to imaginatively slip into the world of Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), in which books are not only abandoned, but burned, and few people can be turned away for any reason from the mindless distraction of wall-to-wall, barely-scripted, interactive television. The world of the word in Bradbury’s book has deteriorated so much that the old literature professor Faber, one of the few who can even remember how it used to be, has to explain to the fireman protagonist Montag that the books do not really have to be burned; rather, “the public

stopped reading of its own accord” (p. 78), which the text suggests is the primary cause of the dystopia Montag has only begun to realize he lives in.

### **Teaching is Dead; Long Live Teaching**

So what are teachers these days to do, especially those of us who teach the word? What does digitization mean to the curriculum? Can we still teach the intricacies, mysteries, beauties, and powers of the word to people who don't read? *Yes*. For one, the dystopian vision of *Fahrenheit 451* still reminds us that all is not lost, even if books as we know them do disappear in the future, and kids don't seem to like to read them much while we have them in the present. Faber is careful to clarify to Montag that the books are not *the thing*; rather, “the magic is only in what books say, in how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 74). And though he is mostly talking about literature, his point offers hope to all who work with the word, curriculum studies theorists included.

Strangely, prophetically maybe, it seems that in his description of what matters, Faber sounds like what he really wants is our own approaching digital storm, particularly the Internet, rather than the preservation of some old dusty libraries no one visits. He even says that “the same infinite detail and awareness could be projected through the radios and televisions, but are not” and instructs Montag to “take it where [he] can find it, in old phonograph records, old motion pictures, and in old friends” (p. 73). This, let us not forget, from a literature professor. Maybe he just sees what we often do not because we are distracted by their various “delivery systems”: all of these things—songs, shows, films, conversations—are born of the same words books are, and can be taught where books are with the *revision* that will allow us to see these things, and our vocations as



curriculum theorists and teachers, anew. About all of them, no matter how they eventually appear to us, we could say “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1).

And as for Birkerts (1994) and his beloved Henry James: I love books, I have degrees in literature, I would rather read serious books long and slow than do many other things, and *I think Henry James is boring too*. So what? Maybe his students are right about the “archaic diction,” “pretentious” vocabulary, and tone that “flaunted superiority” (p. 19). Maybe Paulson (1997) is right, and we don’t have to read canonical writers like Henry James anymore if we don’t want to, if they no longer speak to us, because the canon is an “obsolescent concept” (p. 228) in a digital storm, if it was not already. If the world is in fact too big and dynamic for a list now, or a hallowed shelf of books to contain, and students will primarily need to become good *filters*, to develop “the skills to summon, select, and analyze” from a wide range of swirling, *feedback*-altered information—still mostly word-based—to be successful rather than an intimate knowledge of this dead white guy’s words or that one’s, the news seems good and bad: we curriculum scholars and literature teachers still have work to do, but we may have to trade some of the “golden oldies,” or at least the way we have traditionally studied them, in order to keep doing it.

I have often wondered if kids would still read books if we gave them books they might like. Maybe it’s not that kids *don’t like to read* so much as they *do like to choose*, these kids who have far more choices than the generations before them, and when we try to shove the same old yellowing tomes down their throats that were shoved down ours, we turn them off to what we have to admit is just one of many things they can look to for both entertainment and—we must admit—education. We choose to lose. Perhaps the

digital storm coming will raze the landscape clean of over-heavy, doorstep textbooks that even teachers will often admit they hate. Perhaps the essay will give way to the hypertext annotated blog, or some hybrid essay form in which writing about speeches or film or music can come complete with multimedia illustrations attached. Perhaps the novel is even dead as a central educational tool, or at least the novels we are using right now. Is Henry James really great enough to pin our reading future to him?

Actually, young people are still reading, and if we don't step in and fill the gap between Henry James and *Harry Potter*, *Harry Potter* it will be. Or *Twilight*. Or *something worse*. In fact, if we think books like the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* series are so much worse than the ones we teach, perhaps we should have to explain why. As for textbooks, there is much hope offered in the digital word, even if it is just in a digitally-enhanced "arranged collection of texts and the tools to explore them" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 168), like web-based literary projects; sometimes, like with an author/artist like Blake, the web does a better job with his work, anyway. E-readers are also interesting pedagogically, as theorists like Richard A. Lanham (1993) have argued. With new digital tools available, he exclaims, "what a blessing if each student had a private copy of each assigned text and could mark it up, individualize it just as scholars do with their own books!" (p. 9). For that matter, students could return the text to its original form just as easily. While e-readers would certainly be cost-prohibitive at first, might we save just as much not having to replace poorly manufactured paperbacks all the time? And even if the transition is difficult or expensive, Lanham correctly points out that "we will have to prepare [our students] for a world of work that relies on the electronic word" (p. 10) whether we want to or not. Put that way, it is hard not to agree with him when he says, "I

don't think we can sit out this technological revolution; why not use it?" (p. 10). And if we're not going to use it, why are we buying all of these computers for schools all the time?

Maybe the digital word is the bridge that connects our world and our students' world, our texts to their text messages. It might help if we sound a little less like Birkerts ("Why?!") and little more like Stephen King ("Why Not?"), who recently published an article in *Entertainment Weekly* entitled "Books With Batteries" (2008) about his positive early experiences with Amazon's digital reader, the Kindle. He does call it a "gadget," but a "gadget with stories hiding inside it," and challenges us: "What's wrong with that?" (p. 78).

The more we do use the technological revolution, too, inside of traditional ideas of literature and outside of them, we might notice what Gomez (2008) already has: that if we expand, *revise* what we think of as reading, we will see that young people still read and write all the time. In fact, if we include "things like email, social networking websites, blogs, and wikis, people now read probably more than they ever did" (p. 34). This, of course, is just a partial list of ways in which people interact with texts each day. The word is not dead, and is not even dying; it is actually exploding, morphing, going through innumerable iterations of *feedback* loops at the light-speed of the swirling digital winds enveloping us until we are surrounded by a million fractaled manifestations of the word, and we are all being swept up in the storm.

And right now, it looks like Jenkins (2006) and Birkerts (1994) are both right: we are living in a "convergence culture" (2006) in which "access is not a problem, but proliferation is" (1994, p. 72). But standing right in the middle of all this, if we want to

be, are the digital weather forecasters, the men and women of words. With *revision*, we can be the *filters*, the guides through confusing times, and help our students become those *filters* as well, or we can be forgotten in all the noise. Maybe the novel as we know it will be a collector's item for book lovers like me, and maybe the long form essay will be shorter, web-published, and dynamic. Maybe, as those forms diminish, we will ask more, artistically, of our films, and television shows, and speeches. Maybe we will see the independent, niche bookstore and record store and video store rise, Phoenix-like, from the ashes, as the digital storm wipes out the mainstream book-and-record business recently dominated by big box corporate general stores. Though we may miss the nostalgic experience of digging through crates, I know I, for one, will trade that for the ability to find obscure titles at all, even if I dig for them online and they show up in my mailbox.

Maybe songwriters, or poets, or some hybrid will be the most successful digital adopters, and bring in a new age of a new multimedia poetry. Maybe we will revisit, *revise* with new eyes for a new age not just Henry James, but all of the old masters, and ask if they can still be masters in a world where words don't mean what they used to. And maybe if certain authors, or word art forms, can't tell us why they are still needed in a digital word world, we will let them go to the museums as part of the past (I'm looking at you, newspapers). Maybe digitization means we need to *revise* everything we do at school, and the way we think of curriculum; maybe it will mean we can have greater attention to both *currere* and *recurrere*, and our work will be both *cursive* and *recursive*, *current* and *recurrent*, remembering that in such a curriculum, "there is no fixed beginning or ending" (Doll, Jr., 1993, p. 178). Maybe, maybe, maybe. In a swirling,

dynamic, fractal digital storm, veritable *feedback* funnels all around, I choose to welcome the *maybe*, the possibilities. I choose to write *post-script*, and hope I can teach it. Let us not forget that in the word world whirled, “the future, unpredictable as ever, remains open” (Hayles, 2008, p. 130). Will we be?

The next page is page one.

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