Putting Theory into Practice in the Contemporary Classroom

Putting Theory into Practice in the Contemporary Classroom:

Theory Lessons

Edited by

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There are a number of people who have helped make this book a reality, and I would like to name and thank them here. First, I wish to thank all of my contributors for the hard work they have put in. As an editor, I was not only a pedant but also a taskmaster, and yet they bore with me without complaint, and for that I am deeply grateful.

Next, I wish to thank my dear friend Eric Daffron for encouraging me to attend the 2015 London Conference in Critical Thought for which we organized a series of panels on theory and pedagogy. It was at this conference that *Putting Theory Into Practice in the Contemporary Classroom: Theory Lessons* began to take shape, and thus I would also like to thank the LCCT organizers for giving us the opportunity to try out our ideas under their friendly and welcoming auspices. Although I do not know the names of the many people who attended those panels, it was their enthusiastic and thoughtful responses that gave me the confidence to move forward with assembling this collection of essays, and thus I heartily thank them despite their anonymity.

Back on this side of the Atlantic, thanks are due to my department chair, Steve Trout, who never fails to support his faculty, both intellectually and (when possible) financially, in projects such as this. He is a cheerleader in the best sense of the word. Thanks are also due to my partner, friend, and colleague all-rolled-into-one, Pat Cesarini, for his impossibly kind and generous treatment of me while I was grappling with this manuscript and toiling under a deadline. His willingness to talk through an idea, read a rough draft, water the garden, and/or cook a meal made it possible for me to get my work done with a sense of serenity. He is the best companion someone with my particular work habits could ever have hoped for, and I will always be grateful for his active participation in my life, both academic and otherwise.

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make them heard across the universe, I would. Invaluable help was also provided by Vince Carr, who came to the rescue when I was struggling to complete the index. His eye for detail as well as his ability to load a "toter cart" are stellar, and thus if there is anything amiss with the index, it is not Vince's fault but my own.

The last two people I wish to thank are about as different from each other as any two people can be, but both have given me more "theory lessons" than anyone else: my dissertation director, Joan Copjec, and my son, Jazzbo Cartmell. I couple them here because, like any great teacher, each has made a profoundly rich impact on my life and will continue to do so. When I first encountered Joan Copjec in a graduate seminar at SUNY-Buffalo, I knew nothing about psychoanalysis, but by the time I was writing my dissertation, I felt as if I could *be* an analyst. She was one of the most exciting teachers I have ever had, and if all classes could be conducted like hers, no student would ever complain of boredom again. As for my son, he was born the first semester that I began a tenure-track job here at the University of South Alabama, and thus he has been with me and borne with me during the hardest of my academic challenges. While I was thinking, teaching, and writing about psychoanalysis every day at school, he was giving me an opportunity to see Freud's theories in action every day at home. Jazzbo has given my life, including my work as a teacher and scholar, not only meaning and purpose but also great joy. Without him, *Theory Lessons* would have no rhyme or reason.

INTRODUCTION

THE WOUNDED STUDENT AND THE CRISIS OF DESIRE IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

BECKY MCLAUGHLIN

A therapist once said to me, "You gallop along on your horse, and you come to a wall that needs to be jumped. So you stop the horse, hop out of the saddle, build the wall higher, and then try to jump it from a stand still. You make everything harder than it has to be." I laughed ruefully, partly because I found the image humorous but mostly because I knew she was right. Perhaps it was this habit of making life hard for myself that caused me to accept the task of writing a critical theory textbook. At the time the request came, I was using textbooks in very few of my classes. In fact, I was not a big fan of the textbook as a genre because its aesthetic and pedagogical value seemed dubious to me. But when the managing editor of a major textbook company called to say that I would be perfect for the job of writing one, I succumbed to flattery. Realizing that coupling the unlikely concepts of the everyday and the theoretical in an anthology entitled *Everyday Theory* was going to be an unusually high wall to jump, I brought my friend and colleague Bob Coleman on board as co-editor.

Our first task was to define what we meant by theory, and the lion's share of this task fell to me as I had agreed to write the introduction. Wanting to draw my critical theory students into collaboration, I asked them to weigh in on the following question: "If you had to define theory in one word, what would that word be?" Their answers, among which were a lens, a formula, an explanation, a hypothesis, a philosophy, a discourse, a doctrine, a dogma, an interpretation, a position or stance, and, finally, intellectual masturbation, helped sharpen my thoughts on how to define theory. As I said then and will say now, when theory becomes nothing more than intellectual masturbation, it loses its relevance for the community. And when it hardens into the formulaic, doctrinal, or dogmatic, it ceases to be theory, for theory is precisely a restless questioning, a space in which unresolved issues can be identified and

pursued. The term "theory" may suggest a type of specialized discourse or a collection of "isms," but it is a diverse field that is not simple pluralism. As David Carroll argues in *The States of "Theory*,*"* "Even if it is a manifestation of a certain form of plurality or multiplicity, . . . it does not assume or define the peaceful coexistence of positions that are supposedly noncontradictory, self-sufficient or autonomous, each unto itself."[1] In other words, theory is not a cafeteria where formalism and post-colonialism sit pleasantly and silently cheek by jowl like Jell-O and meatloaf, waiting to be selected by the critic who is hungry for this one day and that the next. It may more closely resemble a battlefield on which one theory attacks another, on which theory occasionally attacks itself like a dog nipping at its own tail, and on which theories join together to create hybrids or coalitions in order to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the perceived opposition. A less violent and more fruitful analogue, however, is provided by Gary Snyder in his definition of poetry: "a tool, a net or trap to catch and present; a sharp edge; a medicine, or that little awl that unties knots."[2] The same can be said of theory. It can be the sharp-edged focus we need when our vision has become blurred, our sensibility glib and complacent, or our intellect lazy and vain. In *Standing by Words*, Wendell Berry argues that "one of the great practical uses of literary disciplines . . . is to resist glibness—to slow language down and make it thoughtful."[3] He is speaking of poetry when he says that "verse checks the merely impulsive flow of speech, subjects it to another pulse, to measure, to extra-linguistic considerations; by inducing the hesitations of difficulty, it admits into language the influence of the Muse and of musing."[4] But he might just as well be speaking of theory, for it, too, resists glibness, slows language down and makes it thoughtful, subjects it to another pulse, induces the hesitations of difficulty, and admits into language the influence of musing and the reciprocal need to muse.[5]

During the time it took us to get the book ready for its publication in 2005, Bob and I engaged in a great deal of discussion about theory—especially regarding its purpose and value—discussion that sometimes

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[1] David Carroll, introduction to *The States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 7.
[2] Quoted in Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words: Essays by Wendell Berry* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 28.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] This definition of theory is a slightly-modified version of the one from the introduction to *Everyday Theory: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Becky McLaughlin and Bob Coleman (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 3.

erupted in argument. I was interested in French theorists, while Bob was interested in American. He was drawn to theorists who use "plain style," while I was drawn to those who engage in "écriture féminine." But the really big difference between us was that I felt as if my life has been changed—no, more accurately, *saved*—by theory, particularly psychoanalysis, and thus I had the conviction and enthusiasm of one who had undergone something akin to a religious conversion. In retrospect, it is no wonder that we frequently butted heads, for, like a missionary, I wanted to "spread the gospel," to show that theory *mattered* and not merely (or even centrally) in the classroom. Was I able to show this, finally, in the textbook's introduction and in the sections that I wrote on "Reading and Writing," "Money and Power," "Culture and Ethnicity," "Desire and Sexuality," and "Identity and Spirituality"? I doubt it. This was a textbook, after all, and textbooks belong inside, not outside, of classrooms.

Since the publication of that book eleven years ago, however, my thinking about where and why theory matters has changed. The word "crisis" has been applied to the state of education with such frequency and urgency in the intervening years that one would quite literally have to bury one's head in the sand to avoid noticing. And thus it was not that old habit of making life hard for myself that caused me to want to produce a book coupling *theoria* and *praxis*, those long-standing antagonists in Western culture, but a growing sense that school had failed both my own child and the students who were registering for my college classes. As Ruth Evans points out in "Be Critical!," the word "critical" has its origins in the word "crisis," and thus it "was originally a medical term: to do with the crisis of a disease."[6] In its origins, says Evans, when one is critical, one occupies a "particular space (the body) and time (of crisis)"[7] between life and death. These are critical times for liberal education—will it live or will it die?— and so we need to bring to bear on our pedagogical practices the ideas of our strongest, most critical thinkers, thinkers such as Arendt, Badiou, Deleuze, Foucault, and Lacan, to name but a few. The place we most need theory, the place where it can have the greatest impact, is precisely in the classroom—hence this collection of essays on the relationship between theory and pedagogy.

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[6] Ruth Evans, "Be Critical!," in *Burn After Reading, Vol. 1, Miniature Manifestos for a Post/Medieval Studies*, ed. Eileen A. Joy and Myra Seaman (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books and Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2014), 20.
[7] Ibid.

I.

At eighteen, my son has just finished his high school years, but in the picture taped to my refrigerator door, he is a first-grader dressed in his school uniform. This picture shows him kneeling on the living room floor as he arranges a group of twenty-six Beanie Babies in a circle, one of whom occupies the center. Each Beanie Baby is perched on a "chair," which is in actuality an upside-down plastic container. Some of the Beanie Babies are sitting up straight, some are slouching, and some are lying down, but no one—certainly not my seven-year-old son—is going to tell them to sit, slouch, or lie otherwise. This is, as my son tells me, a Beanie Baby conference at which the Beanie Babies have gathered to discuss the first seven books of Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which feature the misadventures of the Baudelaire orphans, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny. The Beanie Baby in the center is the smallest but the most important: he is the keynote speaker. Also arranged in a circle, inside the circle of Beanie Babies, are the seven Lemony Snicket books under discussion. When it is time for me to take my son to school, he reluctantly abandons the Beanie Baby Conference but requests that I not interfere by dismantling the conference site. As conference organizer, he will decide when the conference is over.

Looking at this picture and recalling that morning eleven years ago, I marvel at two things: one, that he would have been up early enough to play before going to school given how early school starts here in Mobile, Alabama, and, two, that he would have engaged in this particular type of play, which is somewhat akin to the game my siblings and I called "School" back when we were children. But then I recall earlier episodes that should have prepared me for the Beanie Baby Conference. At age three, my son was poring over the instructions for putting together Lego Bionicles while humming snippets of classical music. At age four, after having been steeped in Greek mythology, he asked me who the father of Prometheus was. "Why do you ask?" I inquired. "I need to know who the father of Prometheus is so that I can go to 'graddy' school and study psychoanalysis," he replied. His question regarding paternity suggests knowledge about psychoanalysis already gained—and at a very young age. That same year, when a plastic action figure tumbled down the chute of a gumball machine, he named it Chaucer. At age five, his favorite topics of conversation were black holes and superstring theory, about which he could hold forth with the best of adults. At age six, he was drawing pictures of people drinking wine and viewing paintings at an art gallery. And instead of setting up a lemonade stand in the front yard, he sold pottery he had made using the clay he had gathered from the banks of a

nearby creek. Literature, music, astronomy, and art—these were the subjects my son cut his teeth on as well as the lifeblood of the humanities.

Once my son left the warm embrace of the Montessori Academy, however, his life in school became a series of unfortunate events resembling those narrated in Lemony Snicket's Book Five, *The Austere Academy*. As Vice Principal Nero says to the Baudelaire orphans, "You'll get an education here if we have to break both your arms to do it."[8] Although my son's elementary school years were not as bad as those the Baudelaire orphans endured at Prufrock Preparatory School, it was clear that the policies of No Child Left Behind had already changed his educational landscape for the worse when I got a call from the school principal requesting that my son participate in a cycle of standardized exams despite the fact that both of his arms had just been placed into casts—the result of an unfortunate event on the playground during after-school hours (recess had been eliminated as part of his standard school day, of course). "Your son always does *very* well on these exams," said the principal, "and we need his score in order to boost the school's score or we'll lose our funding." Surely the fate of an elementary school should not rest on, or even be perceived to rest on, the shoulders of a young boy with two broken arms.

By the time my son was thirteen, getting him to school was a Herculean task. "I'm too tired," he would say. "And it's so boring. I hate school!" This became his everyday mantra and with good reason. In order to get to school on time, he had to be in the car by 6:40 a.m. According to a recent issue of *U. S. New and World Report*, "the vast majority of high schools in this country start before 8:30 a.m., with 43 percent starting before 8:00 a.m.," despite the fact that, in order to accommodate the circadian rhythms of teenagers, the "American Academy of Pediatrics recommends school start no earlier than 8:30 a.m."[9] "I'll tell you who's being accommodated," my son said rather cynically, attempting to eat a granola bar while putting on his shoes and socks in the car on the way to school. "Parents and their work schedules!" The older he got, the more cynical he became and the more resistant to school. One of the most distressing aspects of middle and high school, as my son described it to me, was the absolute quashing of curiosity and the spirit of inquiry. When my son questioned the purpose of a particular assignment or activity, he

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[8] Lemony Snicket, *The Austere Academy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 22.

[9] See Jerusha Conner, "Sleep to Succeed," *U. S. News and World Report*, July 22, 2015, accessed May 14, 2016, http://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/2015/07/22/teens-need-more-sleep-to-succeed-in-school.

was immediately perceived as being insubordinate and was punished accordingly. Here at home, however, I had always encouraged him to ask why and had never fallen back on the authoritarian "Because I told you so!" as an answer for anything. What my son was unsuccessfully attempting to engage in was theory if we understand it as Nick Peim does in *Critical Theory and the English Teacher*: "Theory . . . is the proper process of questioning, of calling to account, or re-examining; a process essential to the health of any cultural practice"—or, I might add, to the health of any *pedagogical* practice—in its refusal "to be content with what is established simply because it is established . . . ."[10] It was a rude awakening for my son to find that in the classroom he could no longer engage in theory and that he was no longer being treated as a rational human being deserving of a reasonable answer to a reasonable question. Ultimately, we opted for homeschooling or—as educational critic and philosopher John Holt calls it—"unschooling." Now my son devotes his days to playing chess, making films, learning to play cello and keyboard, and following politics. He knows more about the natural world than I will ever know, his writing skills are superior to the vast majority of the students in my composition classes, and his vocabulary is bigger and more robust than that of many of my graduate students.

Sadly, my son's educational biography is both typical and atypical—typical in that many students think school is boring and hate having to go, and atypical in that not all of these disenchanted students have the option of being educated at home. Part of the problem with American education, according to educational consultant Kirsten Olson, is that the kind of teaching and knowledge valued by most schools is hopelessly old-fashioned. The "banking" concept of education is still alive and well with teacher-centered classrooms and students who sit "passively receiving information and answering questions when called on."[11] The kind of work students are required to do is very low-level in terms of cognitive function. In fact, reports Olson, "students in 80% of American schools are typically working at the one or two lowest levels of cognitive demand: knowledge and comprehension."[12] No wonder so many students are bored. But, sadly, that is not all they are. In Olson's *Wounded by School*, part one of which is entitled "Broken," she tells story after story "of lost human capacity, of intense grief, of profound shame" arising out of "emotional and spiritual

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[10] Nick Peim, *Critical Theory and the English Teacher: Transforming the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1993), 213.
[11] Kirsten Olson, *Wounded by School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), 61.
[12] Ibid., 61.

experiences of disconnection, misunderstanding, or intellectual rejection in school . . . ."[13] No wonder so many students hate school. When Olson began a research project in which she sought to discover "how extremely motivated, persistent learners had become avid and self-confident,"[14] what she found surprised her. Almost everyone she interviewed had stories of educational wounding, and as she began compiling each educational biography, almost all of her interviewees told her that "they felt they had a lot to recover from in their school experiences, and that their learning lives had developed primarily outside of, or in opposition to, their experiences in school"[15]:

> My interviewees reported that many of their experiences of formal education actually had the opposite effect on them than intended . . . . Rather than making them more dutiful, more competent, and more disciplined, they grew weary of school and learning. Many said that the long-term effects of schooling may have made them too conventional in their thinking, risk averse, overly intimidated by authority, or too likely to underestimate themselves. For some, receiving many negative messages about their behavior and abilities made them almost toxically rebellious, reflexively contrary, and [prone to] acting on anger and hurts that have not been acknowledged. Finally, some of my interviewees described themselves as simply deadened—less enlivened by the world and its possibilities than they might be, sometimes engulfed by a sense of hopelessness about [their] own futures and the possibilities life seems to offer.[16]

What Olson reports here is disheartening, but it certainly rings true when I think about my own early classroom experiences. I am seven years old when what I refer to as the "primal pedagogical scene" takes place. It is 1966, and I am a second grader at a school for "mish kids" in the Belgian Congo. I am sitting in English class, a book report on *The Cat in the Hat* lying on the desk before me. As Mrs. Gorham calls roll, I can hardly contain my excitement. This is my first book report, and I am itching to turn it in to the teacher, certain that I will receive approbation for my creativity. Instead of allowing my sentences to remain trapped on a piece of lined paper, I have released them by cutting out each sentence, carefully moving the scissor blades up around the rabbit ears of the letters "d" and "h" and down around the beaver tails of the letters "p" and "y." That is

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[13] Ibid., 25.
[14] Ibid., 3.
[15] Ibid., 4.
[16] Ibid., 28-29.

how I think of the letters—as living creatures—and I hate to see them stuck between the lines, which remind me of nothing if not a barbed wire fence. When I hand Mrs. Gorham my stack of sentences, neatly held together with a piece of ribbon, her face takes on a pinched look. "What *is* this?" she asks as if she smells something that stinks. "My book report," I reply. Frowning deeply, she says, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Go and stand in the corner." For the rest of the period, I stand with my eyes traveling up and down the seam where two walls come together. Am I crying? I do not recall. Do I feel ashamed, as I have been told that I should? I do not recall. As is the case in obsessive neurosis, affect and event have become untethered through repression. I can recall the event, and I know what its after-effects were, but I cannot recall how I felt in the moment of rebuke and punishment. From an objective standpoint, it may be the case that this classroom episode was less painful than later ones such as the time I received a paddling in front of my sixth-grade classmates for having forgotten to get a test paper signed by my parents. I am a shy, straight-A student, never one to get into trouble, but rules are rules, and so I have to take my licks. "Are you wearing shorts?" asks the teacher, gripping a wooden paddle with holes drilled in it to cut down on wind resistance. "Yes," I reply. "Then lift up your skirt and bend over." Upon returning to my desk, I put my head down and weep in tripartite pain: the pain of being beaten, of being seen being beaten, and then of being seen crying in the aftermath of being beaten and being seen being beaten. Nay, this was pain *en abyme*. Nevertheless, I continue to think of the book report episode as the primal pedagogical scene because of the broken link between affect and event and because it played a fundamental role in my relationship to the classroom for years to come: I did not cut up (with) a text again until after I began to study psychoanalysis in graduate school.

These stories are part of my "institutional autobiography," a term coined by Richard Miller in *Writing at the End of the World*.[17] Agitating for the importance of institutional autobiography, Miller argues that only by acknowledging the personal dimension and recognizing the role it plays in our scholarly work will academic writing remain meaningful. I could not agree with him more. In fact, long before Miller coined the term, I was attempting to call attention to the fact that scholarship is always ruled by the same ambivalences, misprisions, misrecognitions, and prejudices that govern subjectivity. From both a feminist and a psychoanalytic perspective,

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[17] Richard Miller, *Writing at the End of the World* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 138.

it has always seemed important to me, for reasons of authenticity and transparency, to let the reader know where I am coming from, but I did not have a good name for this generic impulse until Miller came up with one. I would argue, however, that writing institutional autobiography is important not only for our scholarly but also for our pedagogical work. If we are to "address the student as a whole person"[18] as Michael Roth and countless others including John Dewey have encouraged us to do, we have to *be* whole persons. And writing in this genre allows us to be teachers, scholars, and subjects all rolled into one big, messy ball of waxy humanity.

For many years, I thought that my classroom experiences were unusual and that most students were able to make their way through school without much epistemological trauma. But the longer I have taught, the more hurt I have either seen or intuited. As Megan Boler states in *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, "Most in the United States undergo twelve compulsory years of schooling. Each of us can recount at least one if not many horror stories about our schooling experience which exemplify humiliation, shame, cruelty, fear, and anger—and sometimes joy, pleasure, and desire."[19] In this context, the word "sometimes" is heartbreaking. Arguing that it is not only fruitful but necessary to address emotions in the classroom, Boler voices the hope that "educators can consider how their pedagogies are informed by their own emotions, moods, and values; how the inexplicit subtexts of emotion impact students; how curricula that neglect emotion (for example, teaching students never to use the word 'I' in writing as it is 'too personal'—a phobia in part reflecting the fear of emotion in higher education) deny students possibilities of passionate engagement."[20] It is interesting to ponder how my book report might have been received if Mrs. Gorham had been aware that her pedagogy was informed by her own emotions, moods, and values. Did she ever consider the impact that the inexplicit subtext of her emotions would or did have on me? It seems unlikely, given that emotions have been systematically discounted in the classroom and that they are notoriously difficult to define. Where emotions are not discounted but acknowledged, however, is in psychoanalysis, and this, along with its narrative and interpretive practices, is one of the reasons that I am drawn to psychoanalysis as a unique form of pedagogy.

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[18] Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), xv.

[19] Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xvii.

[20] Ibid., xviii.

An important difference between Sigmund Freud and his mentor, the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, is that Freud was not merely interested in the etiology of hysteria but in its treatment. (Can it be without significance that the word "hysterical" has come to be defined as "deriving from or affected by uncontrolled extreme emotion"?) Instead of studying the visual oddities of hysteria in a large amphitheater, Freud attended to the aural register in a private office, listening intently to what his hysterical patients had to say and helping them to reestablish the connection between past and present through narrative. In fact, the figure of the storytelling hysteric was central to Freud's development of psychoanalysis. If Freud is the father of psychoanalysis, the famous hysteric Anna O. is certainly the mother, for she is credited with having discovered the cathartic method and with having given it the name of "chimney sweeping" or "talking cure." Noting the importance of Anna O.'s case study, Josef Breuer referred to it as "the germ cell of the whole of psychoanalysis."[21] The hysteric cast a long shadow over the founding moments of psychoanalysis, and thus she has also cast a long shadow over my introduction to and immersion in the writings of Freud and his French disciple, Jacques Lacan.

Studying Anna O., I learned that at the height of her hysteria, she suffered language disturbances such as an inability to speak her native German accompanied by a sudden fluency in English, French, and Italian followed by a lapse into total aphasia. Many of these linguistic symptoms were relieved once she became Breuer's patient and was able to speak about her feelings of anger, despair, and fear. But the real cure came when she published a collection of short stories: "It was not until then, until her subjectivity was visibly represented in the world, that she fully recovered."[22] Like Anna O., Charlotte Perkins Gilman suffered from hysteria, arguing in "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'?" that the purpose of the story was to prevent others from being driven crazy. In Gilman's view, "A woman who allowed herself to be produced, to become an object, would be a hysteric; but one who produced herself, wrote herself, would become well."[23] When Freud made his famous declaration

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[21] Josef Breuer to August Forel, November 21, 1907, quoted in George Pollock, "The Possible Significance of Childhood Object Loss in the Josef Breuer-Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.)-Sigmund Freud Relationship," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 16 (1968): 723.

[22] Diane Price Herndl, "The Writing Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna O., and 'Hysterical' Writing," *NWSA Journal* 1.1 (1988): 67.

[23] Ibid., 69.

of "*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*,"[24] he was saying something along the same lines that Gilman was saying and that the early existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard had proposed in *Either/Or*, namely that the ethical person is editor of her/his own life: "the ethical individual dares to employ the expression that he is his own editor, but he is also fully aware that he is responsible, responsible for himself personally, inasmuch as what he chooses will have a decisive influence on himself . . . . To a certain degree, the person who lives ethically cancels the distinction between the accidental and the essential, for he takes responsibility for all of himself as equally essential."[25] This may have been the single most important lesson I learned as a graduate student, after which writing became not merely an intellectual exercise but a form of self-healing. In writing about the primal pedagogical scene, for example, I was able to transform punishment into punctuation. I was able to take responsibility for the "accident" of having been subjected to Mrs. Gorham's unjust pedagogical practices. Much later I would discover Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, whereby one comes to *be* through narration: "the *subject* is never given at the beginning" of a narrative, for if it were, it would "run the risk of reducing itself to a narcissistic ego, self-centered and avaricious."[26] Ricoeur's narrator is like Freud's or Kierkegaard's ethical subject, but with Ricoeur, there is an added pedagogical dimension. Nothing would be learned if the subject were a given, i.e., were already known at the beginning of the narrative: "In place of an ego enchanted by itself a *self* is born" through stories.[27]

This has important implications for the classroom, especially for those who enter it weary, conventional, risk-averse, toxically rebellious, reflexively contrary, and/or deadened—in short, already having been hurt. Thousands of eighteen-year-olds arrive in our classrooms with psychic wounds that may not always be easy to spot, for these wounds are what grief and loss researchers Nini Leick and Marianne Davidsen-Nielsen might call "ambiguous" wounds: wounds whose effects are hard to

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[24] This statement has been incorrectly translated by ego psychologists as "Where Id was, there Ego must come to be." Freud was not an ego psychologist; nor was Lacan. Thus, the more accurate translation is "Where it was, there I must come to be."

[25] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part II*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 260-261.

[26] Paul Ricoeur, "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator," in *Facts and Values*, ed. M. C. Doeser and J. N. Kraay (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), 132. Emphasis added.

[27] Ibid. Emphasis added.

articulate and generally go unrecognized both by the surrounding culture and by the individual her- or himself.[28] As long as these wounds go unrecognized, however, there is no possibility of healing them. In fact, argues psychotherapist David Stoop, founder of the Center for Family Therapy in Newport Beach, California, "denial of wounding actually intensifies our psychic hurts and impedes our ability to let go of our inner resentments, forgive, and move on with equanimity and resolution."[29] I feel sure that a large number of the students I have had in my classes, especially at the undergraduate level, have failed to recognize the ways in which school has hurt them, and thus they have not been able to shed their resentments, forgive, and move on to embrace higher education with equanimity and resolution.

   If the desire to learn is one of life's most fundamental desires, then what I am seeing are students arriving in my classes with a full-blown crisis of desire. After twelve years of immersion in a compulsory educational system that John Holt compares to the meat packing industry—a system in which learning is considered a product, not a process, in which learning must be assessed in easily measurable and quantifiable ways, and in which students are seen as "unformed products" to be shaped, stamped, graded, and sent off to market—students have reacted defensively by developing symptoms of resistance to learning. A symptom is, as Freud describes it in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, "a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression."[30] It may be the case that the way contemporary schools operate represses the "epistemophilic instinct" or the "instinct for knowledge" (as Freud conceptualizes it), replacing it with what Lacan refers to as "a will not to know (a *ne rien vouloir savoir*)."[31] In other words, this "will not to know" is a reaction to and defense against having one's desire to know stymied. Ignorance, then, becomes a "passion greater than love or hate[,]"[32] a passion that can only be overcome through the teacher's desire. Although education is not therapy, it does have a therapeutic dimension just as therapy has a pedagogical. In fact, there are many parallels between the classroom and the clinic, teacher and analyst, student and analysand. The

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[28] Ibid., 84-85.

[29] Ibid., 84.

[30] Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, trans. Alix Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 9.

[31] Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7.

[32] Ibid.

teacher's desire, for example, is quite similar to the analyst's desire, which Bruce Fink refers to as a "purified desire" that has nothing to do with the analyst as feeling human being but with the analyst as a function or role. This "purified desire" is "an enigmatic desire that does not tell the patient what the analyst wants him or her to say or do,"[33] for neurotics are not really engaged in analysis when they attempt to fulfill or frustrate the analyst's desire. Nor, would I argue, are students engaged in learning when they attempt to fulfill or frustrate the teacher's desire. Like the analyst, what the teacher wants her/his students to do is to adopt a certain practice of reading or thinking, not a particular content. Instead of stating a desire for this or that outcome, the analyst's job, like the teacher's, is to get the analysand to engage in the work of analysis, i.e., "to come to therapy, to put his or her experience, thoughts, fantasies, and dreams into words, and to associate to them."[34]

Until recently, I believed that only the student's desire mattered and that mine was completely out of place in the classroom. In this respect, I was a good deal like many of the therapists and therapists-in-training with whom Fink has worked. According to Fink, they think that expressing any desire at all to their analysands is inappropriate, even when an analysand misses an appointment or stops therapy altogether. Like these "non-desiring" therapists, I believed that if my students wanted to come to class, they would and that if they did not want to and thus were absent, it was not my responsibility (or my right) to encourage them to do otherwise. What Fink points out, however, is that it is not the analysand's flagging desire that drives analysis but the analyst's unflagging one. The same, I would argue, is true of the classroom. It is the teacher's desire, not the student's crisis of desire, that ignites conversation, debate, and discussion—in short, *participation*. Having made this recognition, I realize that, as Fink argues, even subtle expressions of desire may keep students in class when they have no will, much less desire, to continue attending. Now I say, "I look forward to seeing you at our next class session," and if students are absent, I let them know that their presence in class matters to me, that I want them to attend and that I consider them an important part of our classroom community. This new approach is more in keeping with Bill Readings' understanding of pedagogy as "a *relation, a network of obligation*."[35] In *The University in Ruins*, he speaks of the teacher as a *rhetor* rather than a *magister*, for "[t]he *rhetor* is a speaker who takes account of the audience,

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[33] Ibid., 6.
[34] Ibid., 7.
[35] Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 158. Emphasis added.

while the *magister* is indifferent to the specificity of his or her addressees." [36] Believing as I now do that my students come to me wounded and that this may account for their apparent reluctance to learn, it is no longer possible for me to be indifferent to the specificity of those whom I address. Thus, when my students demand a dumbed-down version of something complex, a study guide for easy memorization, a passing grade, or, ultimately, a degree, I force myself to remember what Lacan said: "*Just because people ask you for something doesn't mean that's what they really want you to give them.*" [37] To take at face value a demand that is merely expedient is to miss an opportunity to try "to hear that which cannot be said but that which tries to make itself heard." [38] What cannot be said but nevertheless tries to make itself heard is the unconscious. At some deeply (or maybe not so deeply) repressed level, what my students *really* want but no longer know how to ask for, I would wager, is passionate engagement and not "a customized playlist of knowledge." [39]

I am not alone in this wager. In "The 'Good-Enough' Teacher and the Authentic Student," a title which plays on British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's concept of the "good-enough mother," Guy Allen describes the positive shift that occurred in his students' writing when they stopped wanting merely to please him and traded in their compliant, defensive voices for personal, expressive ones. In teaching an expository writing class at the University of Toronto, Allen found that although his students had been capable of meeting rigorous admissions requirements, they were unable to write expository essays that could pass muster. As Allen admits, "I read them and despaired. Clauses tangled, modifiers danged, clichés governed, subjects and verbs disagreed, and premises masqueraded as conclusions. Worse, few of these essays had any meaning. These essays faked the making of meaning." [40] In trying to understand what appeared to be a cognitive disconnect, Allen turned to theory, and he found Winnicott's concepts of the True and False Self useful. [41] Through Winnicott, what Allen began to recognize was that his students were creating a False Self in order to defend themselves against what they

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[36] Ibid. Emphasis added.

[37] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 20. Emphasis added.

[38] Ibid., 165.

[39] Roth, *Beyond the University*, xi.

[40] Guy Allen, "The 'Good-Enough' Teacher and the Authentic Student," in *A Pedagogy of Becoming*, ed. Jon Mills (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 143.

[41] Although I do not like the binarism implied by Winnicott's concepts of True and False Self, I nevertheless find something fruitful in Allen's use of the concepts to describe student writing at the university level.

perceived to be a hostile environment, and this was negatively affecting their writing. According to Allen, because the university is relentless in its focus on evaluation and judgment, it creates defensive behavior on the part of the students, and thus the "poor writing our students produce speaks in the voice of the False Self."[42] Like Allen, I have seen the kind of writing produced by the False Self—"compliant prose," as Allen calls it, which not only alienates the reader but also expresses the alienation of the writer—and I know that the expressive, honest, personalized voice that reflects its own experience and psychic reality is the only voice that leads to the kind of self-healing students are in need of. Allen's experiments in the classroom have led him to adopt, and to encourage others to adopt, three practices, two of which are pertinent to the argument that I have been making: one, "assignments that encourage students to write first-person narratives based on their experiences and observations" and, two, "an instructor/student relationship defined by the instructor's operating as editor (supportive other) rather than simply as judge . . . ."[43] The basic features of Allen's writing course mimic the basic features of a psychoanalytic session with its emphasis on personal narrative and non-judgmental relationship between analyst and analysand. Referring to Freud as a master of the narrative, Donald Spence argues that "a well-constructed story possesses a kind of narrative truth that is real and immediate and carries an important significance for the process of therapeutic change."[44] In fact, many contemporary psychotherapeutic practices make use of narrative in treating those suffering from psychic trauma, and even medical doctors are beginning to see the value of narrative in treating patients who are physically ill.

Using language that sounds like that used in a literature classroom, child psychiatrist and medical educator Leon Eisenberg describes his psychiatric practice in this way: "The decision to seek medical consultation is a request for interpretation. . . . Patient and doctor together reconstruct the meanings of events in a shared mythopoesis. . . . Once things fall into place, once experience and interpretation appear to coincide, once the patient has a coherent 'explanation' which leaves him no longer feeling the victim of the inexplicable and the uncontrollable, the symptoms are, usually, exorcised."[45] What is perhaps most valuable in Eisenberg's

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[42] Ibid., 154.
[43] Ibid., 148.
[44] Donald Spence, *Narrative Truth as Historical Truth* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 21.
[45] Leon Eisenberg, "The Physician as Interpreter: Ascribing Meaning to the Illness Experience," in *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 22 (1981): 245.

description is the concept of collaboration, a concept emphasized by Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs, who argue that in telling and retelling about one's experiences, opportunities for collaboration between therapist and client arise—and thus opportunities for reinterpretation and revision of self and other.[46] If our students are wounded, as certainly seems to be the case, we have before us an exciting collaborative opportunity, that of functioning as supportive other who helps students begin to identify and narrate their primal pedagogical scenes and thus to heal. Does this mean abandoning all judgment regarding student work? No, I believe that we continue to be obliged to assess and evaluate in order to help our students develop and grow. What I am suggesting, however, is that we provide opportunities for students to think, talk, and write about the ways in which they have been pedagogically wounded. Once the writing cure has been initiated, perhaps there will be less resistance to learning and the "epistemophilic instinct" will be reinstated. Perhaps school will become a place where students find joy, pleasure, and desire on more than a "sometimes" basis.

II.

While writing this introduction, I found myself reading a collection of manifestos presented at the 2012 International Congress on Medieval Studies, which was published in 2014 as a two-volume book entitled *Burn After Reading*. As Eileen A. Joy explains in her prefatory note to volume one, the presenters had been asked to think about and articulate what kind of future they wanted for post/medieval studies. It might not seem that a book of manifestos would have much in common with *Theory Lessons*, but, in fact, much of what is stated in *Burn After Reading* resonates with the ideas presented by the fifteen essayists in this collection. For these essayists, too, gesture toward the kind of future we want for the humanities, and so in solidarity with our medieval colleagues, I weave their manifestos together with our ideas about theory and pedagogy. In Lisa Weston's manifesto, for example, she pledges to "manifest magical, fantastical and eccentric glamour in [her] scholarship and teaching."[47] This is a worthy pledge, one that the essayists featured in *Theory Lessons* have

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[46] Linda C. Garro and Cheryl Mattingly, "Narrative as Construct and Construction," in *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing*, ed. Cheryl Mattingly and Linda C. Garro (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 7.
[47] Lisa Weston, "'Tis Magick, Magick That Will Have Ravished Me," in *Burn After Reading, Vol. 1, Miniature Manifestos for a Post/Medieval Studies*, ed. Eileen A. Joy and Myra Seaman (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books and Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2014), 120.

already made good on as teachers, and while these essays may not be manifestos in the literal sense of the word, each essay either explicitly or implicitly offers a statement of principles as well as a call to action. Certainly these essays are as sincere, honest, and hopeful as manifestos generally are, and they serve the same purpose of unsettling the status quo.

A case in point is Bruce Krajewski's "Žižek on Ideology as Not Seeing, or, the Eyes (Don't) Have It," in which he argues that theory is by its very nature a threat to the status quo, especially to the status quo of consumer culture. Although Krajewski does not make explicit reference to anthropologist Barbara Tedlock, we can feel her influence hovering in the margins of his essay, for Tedlock has reminded us that the word "theory" comes from the ancient Greek *theoria*, "which refers to a sacred pilgrimage to a distant land in order to consult an oracle. Such a visitation involves the observation of material objects together with a heightened form of witnessing or sacramental way of seeing."[48] Tackling head-on the difficult question of how to teach theory when the humanities are being squeezed ever more brutally into utilitarian spaces and when students have been thoroughly steeped in a capitalist environment, Krajewski offers the glamour of Slavoj Žižek, the magic of Philip K. Dick, and the eccentric mixture of Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Brain Games," and Agnès Varda to make the case for theory's resilience, plenitude, and dynamism. Although some academics have taken up a post-theory attitude, Krajewski makes a convincing case for why we should avoid joining their ranks by pointing to the power of theory to see what generally escapes the eye, particularly ideological abuses that go undetected by those wearing the spectacles of common sense. Krajewski begins his essay by pointing to the theorist—in this case, Thales of Miletus—as a comic spectacle, but he gives theory the last laugh, arguing as Hans Blumenberg does in *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* that the image of the scatterbrained professor "serves as camouflage for the work of undoing capitalism." Krajewski's is a great kick-off essay for anyone who feels the need to commiserate about the

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[48] Furthermore, says Tedlock, "[t]he Greek verb *theorein*, together with its Latin form *observatio*, indicates a journey with a divinatory purpose, combined with attentiveness in caring for sacred objects and places. Persons who undertook such journeys, called *theoros* in Greek, visited shrines where deities revealed themselves. In this ancient world, . . . religious festivals created a suspension of the world of work, providing an opening for the holy to illuminate the everyday world." See "Theorizing Divinatory Acts: The Integrative Discourse of Dream Oracles," in *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium*, ed. Patrick Curry (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 12.

sorry state of affairs in which higher education currently finds itself vis-à-vis the administrative, bureaucratic, and political powers that be.

Like Krajewski in his effort to introduce his students to the invisibility of ideology, Barry Mauer begins his essay, "Curating the Mystory: Ideology and Invention in the Theory Classroom," with a reference to Louis Althusser, who argues that ideology is not just a set of beliefs about the world but material practices that shape as well as police identity and social relationships. Because ideology is put in place so early and operates unconsciously, says Mauer, discovering our ideological blind spots can be difficult. But Mauer has found a creative way to help his students do just that through the use of Gregory Ulmer's "mystory," a reflective style of writing akin to that of Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse*. Not content with critique alone—perhaps Mauer believes as Bruno Latour does that "*what performs a critique cannot also compose*"[49]—Mauer has his students engage in what Ulmer refers to as "electrate" reasoning (which makes use of loose association rather than the deductive and/or inductive methods common to "literate" reasoning) to create curated exhibits resulting from collages of historical images, autobiographical texts, found objects, news reports, and various types of art coupled with collections of various media, including still images, printed text, audio, video, and displayed objects. In creating their mystories, Mauer's students work in groups composed of a querent, witness, diviner, and curator. According to Mauer, the group approach allows for greater reflective disclosure because what one student sees, another may be blind to. One of the things Mauer's students begin to recognize through their mystories is that the disciplines, including the humanities, carry ideological baggage just as surely as does any other institution. And so Mauer encourages his students as well as his fellow teachers to use the mystory to reflect upon their institutions' values, behaviors, and sacrifices.

In "Text, Theory, and Things: Toward a Pedagogy of Vital Being," Matthew Overstreet asks how we can understand who we are as teachers and conceptualize our pedagogical project when we live in an age bereft of foundational authority and grand narratives. For many teachers and students, the postmodern world is characterized by loss and disillusionment, and Overstreet uses what might be called Patricia Bizzell's "mystory" as an illustration of the impact of postmodern thought on pedagogy. In Bizzell's mystory, she describes the changes that took place in her thinking as a teacher and scholar over a twenty-year period,

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[49] Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* (2010), accessed May 14, 2016, http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/120-NLH-finalpdf.pdf. Emphasis added.

during which she came to doubt that education could combat poverty and political oppression. Overstreet takes a much more optimistic view of what has been called the postmodern impasse, however, when he argues that a concern for context, coupled with a respect for rigorous critique, can help (re)forge the apparently broken link between ethical action and postmodern thought. Like Krajewski and Mauer, Overstreet asks how we should "do theory" in a post-postmodern age. His answer is that we must understand theory as a living thing, as "something that happens in space and time through conscious, communal action," and that we can create new avenues for pedagogical theory by turning toward the objects that populate our world and establishing relationships with them. In short, Overstreet advocates a mashup of postmodern thought's epistemology and speculative realism's ontology. In calling for a "transrational" mode of engagement, Overstreet eschews notions of mastery for the vitality that emerges in an encounter with the object in its limitless, infinite, and unfathomable depth. And thus his call resoundingly echoes that of Harris and Overbey in *Burn After Reading*: "to treat . . . *objects* . . . with compassion. To *see* them in their native logics, their strangeness, their ontological beauty. Materiality is not a trend or a fashion or a mode; it *is* an ethical system, and it should inform our collective future."[50] Like mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Hadewijch, and Margery Kempe, Overstreet seems to believe that "looking at objects (and touching them, stroking them, losing yourself to them) could save your soul."[51]

Matching Overstreet's optimism for postmodernity's positive program, Robert Gray powerfully demonstrates the merit of taking a postmodern or poststructuralist approach to assessment in higher education. In "Teaching and Learning as Textual Acts: Roland Barthes, Assessment, and the Value of the Writerly," Gray argues that by adopting the Derridean standpoint that "everything is a text," each aspect of a college course can be made available for analysis and evaluation. According to Gray, the classroom as text is a complex web of signifiers and signifieds that can fruitfully be understood through Roland Barthes' concepts of "writerly" and "readerly" as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of "novel" and "epic" texts. Using Barthes' concepts to assess the college classroom, Gray asserts that while the writerly puts students in the active position of meaning-makers, the readerly does the opposite. Like Kirsten Olson, Gray has found that many

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[50] Anne F. Harris and Karen Eileen Overbey, "Field Change/Discipline Change," in *Burn After Reading, Vol. II, The Future We Want*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books and Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2014), 143. Emphasis added.

[51] Ibid., 139.

classrooms continue to operate in a readerly rather than a writerly fashion, despite educators' avowed interest in active learning techniques. One of the obstacles to active learning and/or the writerly is the physical space in which classes are taught. Designed for lecture-based teaching, which is teacher-centered, the classrooms themselves work against writerly practices, argues Gray. The problem with the readerly is that it creates an artificial relationship to the truth through a lecture's veneer of authenticity and expert authority. It also creates the illusion of denotation, which tricks us into believing that there is a literal meaning to the curriculum and thus an easy way to measure student outcomes. But, as Gray points out, preordained objectives are problematic, especially when interactive learning is introduced into the classroom, for interactive learning leads to unexpected and "collectively achieved ends" that depend not just on the professor but also on the students. This problematizing of preordained objectives resonates with what Will Stockton suggests in *Burn After Reading*: that we "delete all course objectives from our syllabi—all things that seek in advance to tell the student what he or she will learn."[52] It resonates, too, with statements made by his co-writer, Allan Mitchell: "The humanities should be a place for safe stumbling, a place to forget what we're doing and to figure it out later; it should encourage people to try on ideas that do not have a secure place in the world, or not yet. The humanities need a new kind of modal logic: *necessarily, everything is contingent*."[53] Writing as if in response to Stockton and Mitchell, Gray argues that coupling Barthes' writerly plurality with Bakhtin's novelistic *indeterminacy* gives students agency in the classroom and thus in the pedagogical process itself. Decentralizing the classroom helps students learn how to live life as participants rather than as mere consumers, and thus, for Gray, the "co-production of meaning should be the only true objective of learning."

Although Camelia Raghinaru makes use of the ideas of Lacan rather than those of Barthes or Bakhtin, what she argues in "Psychoanalysis and the Production of the New" is very much in keeping with the argument Gray makes for writerly plurality and novelistic indeterminacy. Using Lacan's four discourses (those of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst), Raghinaru explores and exposes the sometimes-fraught relationship between teacher and student in the production of knowledge. Focusing on uncertainty as a crucial aspect of pedagogy, she argues that

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[52] Allan Mitchell and Will Stockton, "Time Change/Mode Change," in *Burn After Reading, Vol. II, The Future We Want*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books and Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2014), 162.
[53] Ibid. Emphasis added.