

THE ESSAY, IN THEORY

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One who wants the truth will become a scholar; one who wants to give free play to his subjectivity will perhaps become a writer; but what should one do who wants something that lies in between?

—Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*

The works of the great thinkers, unlike great works of literary art, appear in their truest form when the seal of perfection is not set on them, but when they still reflect the incessant movement and the inner restlessness of thought itself.

—Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*

In English, at least, essay theory makes for a dialectically enlightening literature review. What one might, with perfect justice, call a vast wealth of work on the anarchival genre is now—has always been quickly—out of print, exclusive property of the scholarly archives through control of which we guarantee (less persuasively by the day, to be sure) our expertise. It is as though one were *condemned* to the archive by writing about the essay, that form so often and so vigorously imagined as a bridge linking university writing to what is left of the literary public sphere—or more recently, to “creative writing,” its institutional analogue. The formalized suicide that is writing for expiration, in this way, is in the end perhaps no more than the hyperbolization of scholarly discipline itself, as the production of writing—I do not say knowledge—which no one but fellow specialists will or can read. Which would make essay theory a prime exemplar of what Paul Mann called “masocriticism,” the self-consciousness of bureaucratic intellectual productivity facing its own finitude—if exemplarity were not of course its very symptom [see Mann].

We ritually embrace such death, nevertheless. What I mean is that scholarship on the essay is perfectly willingly accepted as scholarship, so long as it resists the live-wire charge of its critical object. In some ways, the living death of the essay in printed books—its archival death, in the life restricted to libraries—mirrors the thematics of Anglophone essay theory itself, fond as it is of tabular schemas which, like the modernism/postmodernism contrast tables now thrown on the junk pile of critical history,¹ serve to clarify as a contrast of objects what is really, by the terms of the effort itself, an object and its limit as object—its conceptual death *as* a thing or a category of things to be contrasted. The essay *is*, in this sense running ahead of (indeed refusing) that death, to be nonchalant, inconsistent, digressive, flexible, personal, subjective, humanistic, tolerant, dynamic, voluptuous (column one)—where its systemic other (the article, the treatise, the system itself) is serious, invariant, rigid, impersonal, objective, scientific, dogmatic, static, ascetic (column two). The essay is beneficently amateurish, a thinking in process, speculative and rumina-

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1. The phrase “junk pile of critical history” is Glenn Willmott’s [see Willmott 207].

tive, a theory “in time”; its other is professional, controlled, conclusive.² And on and on.

One is perfectly willing to accept the division of labor that embeds these distinctions in the two cultures of our profession; that is, until one considers, perhaps, even with narrowly Anglocentrist readers like G. Douglas Atkins or Graham Good, that scholars at the top of the prestige pyramid, in the literary humanities, have *always* been writing essays [Atkins, “Return” 8; Good 178]. It is to that extent that even in the rigorous Adornian ruminations on critical wordplay to be found, for example, in one of Fredric Jameson’s earliest works, one misses, in its concrete articulation, a sense of the obstacles the critic himself must have faced, in even so charmed a formation as his own, to operating within the material infrastructures of the publishing industry and the literary marketplace, as constraints placed on criticism itself.³ (And which, in part at least, finally drove Adorno from these shores [see Hullot-Kentor xiv].) The long and magnificent essay that closes 1971’s *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, and which, in tracing a path from scholarly specialization to the concretion of the properly historicized object, deftly distinguishes positivism, as criticism’s true enemy, from the idealism to which it is not, after all, irreconcilable [Jameson 368, 377] carries within it a mere thread, perhaps, of proscriptive restraint that sits at enormous odds with its prescription for a criticism of vertigo, in the concrete stylization of a few sentences more than worth isolating, here:

This is indeed the most sensitive moment in the dialectical process: that in which an entire complex of thought is hoisted through a kind of inner leverage one floor higher, in which the mind, in a kind of shifting of gears, now finds itself willing to take what had been a question for an answer, standing outside its previous exertions in such a way that it reckons itself into the problem, understanding the dilemma not as a resistance of the object alone, but also as the result of a subject-pole deployed and disposed against it in strategic fashion—in short, as the function of a determinate subject-object relationship.

There is a breathlessness about this shift from the normal object-oriented activity of the mind to such dialectical self-consciousness—something of the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator’s fall or in the sudden dip in an airliner. That recalls us to our bodies much as this recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers. [308]

2. On the essay as calculatedly amateurish, and as thought in process, see Atkins, “The Return of/to the Essay,” 5 ff. and Good 3 ff.; on the “anti-Ciceronian chrono-logic” of “theory in time,” see Heilker 39 ff.

3. See Jameson: “It will no doubt be objected that we are playing on words, and that style as an object of research and as a literary category is not to be confused with what we have above described as the historical phenomenon of style in the modernistic sense. Yet such ‘wordplay,’ inadmissible as it may seem to the older analytical type of logical reasoning, is the very essence of the dialectical method itself: as a scandal for static rationality, its inner movement dramatizes the irresistible link between a formal concept and that historical reality in which it originated” [334–35]. “[A] regrounding of the work of art in the world of commodities would first be understood in as literal a fashion as possible. For it is a sobering and salutary experience for professional intellectuals to be reminded that the objects of their study and manipulation have a whole material infrastructure as well, which has traditionally been the realm of the sociology of literature. The investigations thereby implied—of the publishing industry and its gradual economic concentration, of the literary market, of the role of the older forms of distribution as well as the newer media—are external to literature only in the sense that the public world is external to private life. Yet . . . in America private middle-class consumption has increasingly been replaced by that of the university system, which seems destined to play as crucial a role in the culture of postindustrial capitalism as did the monastery for medieval times” [393].

One would like to think that as one of the most trenchant thinkers *and* prose stylists of his generation, Jameson had no trouble making good on the promise implicit here, to integrate such “sickening” into the discipline. Such assumptions, of course, belong to that species of historical myth or theory that Jameson regarded, in *Marxism and Form*, as attempts to “outsmart the present,” in a “profound horror of time and fear of change” [320]. Still, in addition to the imperative expressed by the statement that “a genuinely dialectical criticism must always include a commentary on its own intellectual instruments as part of its own working structure” [336], for example, or to that signaled by the long extract from C. Wright Mills’s *White Collar*, which, addressing the “commodity structure of academic intellectual life,” most truly (but temporarily) breaches the frame of Jameson’s own very self-conscious essayism [393], one might have liked to find some cognitive mapping of the terrain upon which one scholarly generation exacts from the next a new-class vengeance for the ordeals of anachronic tenantry or guildry—and of how any criticism, from the most primordially timid all the way up to Jameson’s “thought to the second power” [45], can hope to refigure *that*.

To his credit, Jameson, like any intellectual more concerned with thought than governance, has never seemed much interested in policing access to the means of scholarly production. But junior scholars are not always so lucky. It is an earned right, one is told: to write texts that make “less” sense, once one has been certified to do so. One might say that such advice imagines a transaction that can never have occurred, to the extent that no certifying agent can or would permit itself to exist, for such a purpose—among other reasons because the dispenser of such advice is almost always secretly pledged to obstruct it as well, and the gradualist prescription for “creative criticism” is purely proleptic, in the dilatory sense that promises for the sake of containment.

In the pages of the cultural institution that was the Scottish Enlightenment’s answer to Diderot, Henri Peyre once lamented the essay as a victim of the forgetting of rhetoric, in the newly positivist Anglophone intellectual culture of the early twentieth century.⁴ Even so, Peyre implied, the essay could be understood to have returned, almost immediately, from its banishment, as systematic philosophy was displaced by the social or human sciences then floating, in the amphibolous cross-bias that is Foucault’s sole research object, in a new order of things.⁵ If, between the Euro-Atlantic modernities of Montaigne and Marx, respectively, we can locate what Claire de Obaldia calls the “essayistic spirit” of Hegel contra Hegel [47–48], that recursion from which there is truly no escape, then our task here is perhaps to write our way *into* rather than out of time. Let me attempt just such a prolepsis.

* * *

The essay is dead; long live the essay. The encyclopedic dreaminess (or dreamy encyclopedism) of Lichtenberg’s “waste books” is one figure for what is again being imposibilized in academic literary studies today, intolerant as it is of both encyclopedism and dreaminess.⁶ In an age of triumphally pragmatic historicism and resurgent scientism, we are newly receptive, it seems, to the idea that practices of language are *things* we can identify and analyze in a professional idiom safely and securely less creative, and more purely—that is to say clinically, even forensically—descriptive, than the artifact’s own. In this new positivism, a humanities profession rearmed for commentary on global war

4. See “nonfictional prose,” Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 2009.

5. See Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*; Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

6. For an essayistic (and essay-theoretic) glance at Lichtenberg’s *Sudelbücher*, see Koestenbaum, esp. 51 ff.

meets the unabated escalation of positional standards for professional evaluation, in the quantification of production for the university's form of symbolic expenditure. We are bound to nothing less than the hyperaccumulation of specialized knowledge, a form of waste that prohibits waste, and to regard every last word of our productions as capitalizable intellectual property, to which redaction itself is inferior. Where administrative reception of the recent report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion seems as likely to concentrate scant resources for publication as to blunt the drive for incessant publication itself, the report's apparently casual conflation of "essay" with "article" might be said to elide the evaluative masses of two partly distinct categories.⁷ No research-intensive institution I am aware of—at least none hoping to rise in the ranks—requests, in its own voice, a list of peer-reviewed "essays" as the first evidence of qualification for promotion and tenure. This is to say, perhaps, that the report's interest in reviving a role for the public intellectual in the academy, by leaving value within tenure review for publication in venues other than scholarly journals and presses, leaves the way forward blocked by an elephant in the room which we might as well call Creative Writing, the symptom and trace of everything with which contemporary academic literary studies, even in reformist mode, still cannot contend.

Clearly, though, Creative Writing *is* being discussed, and if that discussion takes the form of curricular review and committee realpolitik more than anything resembling intellectual exchange, that is of course partly the legacy of the sinecure system, structurally protected as it was, in many ways, from the interference of what was certainly then a more deeply and fatally parasitic scholarship. The entrenched secessionism of this legacy won't be changed; Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice, its most articulate analysts, predict that moving forward will require generational if not epistemic change, in a capaciously renovated vision of criticism itself [see Ritter and Vanderslice; Houghton et al.]. In the meantime, we are mired in another version of the Two Cultures which, as C. P. Snow put it, was always about two languages—the language of symbols and the language of words—and within which learning the other's "foreign" language is considered a waste of time, even when *you* are the topic of *their* conversation [see Snow 15].

What does this mean? First, that the segregation of the production of literature from its reception produces writers who no longer want to argue at all, in the sense that in all positive science drives the discovery of knowledge: a disagreement, gradually refined to consensus, about the fact of the world. University writers today want only to write. Between such writers, who write "creative writing," and scholars who write articles and monographs stands the essay: self-consciously created rather than received, with an argument not only *about* the world, but about writing itself, that dangerously spacious and

7. See http://www.mla.org/tenure_promotion_pdf. One section of the report (part 1, section 4) is subtitled "Revaluing the Essay." At times, the report uses the words "essay" and "article" interchangeably but in unambiguous reference to peer-reviewed scholarly writing: "In our view, a body of essays or articles in peer-reviewed journals can demonstrate the quality of scholarly work as well as or, in some cases, better than a monograph of similar length" [40]. Elsewhere (but often in contiguous passages), "essay" presumably means non-peer-reviewed and in any case not exclusively scholarly writing: "Moreover, edited collections of articles, critical editions, annotated translations of important primary texts, essays written for a general audience, trade books, textbooks, and pedagogically useful monographs, as well as publications or other professional work in electronic form, may contribute to a body of scholarly and professional work that can meet the highest standards of scholarship in the tenure-review process" [40–41, *emphasis added*]. My point here is merely that while a scholarly "article" is, in the humanities at least, always also an "essay," the reverse is not necessarily acceptably true— which is why we use the term "article" when we want to distinguish the essay published in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal from other, less rigorously certified essays—and that the apparent redundancy of the report's use of both terms is in fact a rhetorical gesture (if also an unprogrammable one) enacting that revaluation of the essay.

specious mode. The essay—and its practice, *essayism*—is deeply and fatally *sophistic* in this sense, as Adorno knew.⁸ I want to suggest that its reception, in US departments of literary studies, in the form of “theory”—not modernity as such, but modernity’s “writing in time”—was a perfectly symptomatic instance of form, that which links the writing of literature to the writing of literary scholarship, reappearing as content.⁹ As the focus of the MLA Task Force Report, writing “for a general audience” is the diurnal Anglo-American face of the philosophical *essayism* practiced by alien Continental writers, the dialectical prose of whom could be said to lead from the top of the profession today, even as it is disciplined out of the lower ranks. At a time when it has become routine to look back at the critical reflexivity of a lost epoch of “high theory” as some kind of regrettable excess, the new ban on sophisticated expenditure reveals something of the anxiety of affluence in a rapidly aging profession—including an anxiety for and of the self-reproduction threatened by that aging, an effect above all else of successful assaults on academic labor. Of these episodes of cathexis in “regret for theory,” none was so blatant as the barely contained glee at the end that Jacques Derrida’s death brought to his publication stream, and thus to his live place in US academic culture. Whatever else it was, Derrida dead was Derrida no longer writing.

“That’s merely *writing*; he’s not really *saying* anything.” If this was heard everywhere in the bygone days of Derrida’s star, that was only because his programmatic *confusion* of philosophy with writing had already won over so many literary scholars who felt that their work as producers of knowledge was also—writing. The “death of theory” is really the death of this assent: and it *is* real. “Theory” is still here, but the theory-*effect* is gone. For if Derrida’s dissemination in literary studies gave us, among other things, a form of consensus about what we call “research” as writing—as an activity, and a sequence of products of that activity, lived in time—this is still more widely accepted as a theoretical position in the ordinary sense, as a construct restricting social behavior to thought, than it is practiced. And not in a simply remediable failure to see the implications of the theory for the practice: what we are dealing with here is rather an equally programmatic suppression of rhetoricity [see Sullivan]. The “invisibility” of the essay, in this context, is structural rather than spontaneous: not an “oversight” but an over-seeing, the disciplinary *spatialization* of specialization by (optical) research field [see Rancière]. It is in this sense, perhaps, that Derrida’s legacy has passed and, at the same time, that he has not yet begun to be read.¹⁰

One might say that in literary studies, debate over two topics of the moment—promotion and tenure evaluation and the place of creative writing among the disciplines—is now taking place contiguously with a debate about monolingualism and multilingualism in US humanities research training.¹¹ I want to suggest that these debates are linked by something more than coincidence, and that the reconvergence of literary studies with creative writing (or of creative writing with literary studies) proposed by Marjorie Per-

8. See Adorno, “*Der Essay als Form*” 30; “*The Essay as Form*” 168.

9. For a recent sampling of perspectives on this process, see, for example, Culler.

10. See Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally*: “I have . . . the double feeling that, on the one hand . . . one has not yet begun to read me, even though there are, to be sure, many very good readers (a few dozen in the world perhaps, people who are also writer-thinkers, poets), in the end it is later on that all this has a chance of appearing; but also, on the other hand, and thus simultaneously, I have the feeling that two weeks or a month after my death there will be nothing left. Nothing except what has been copyrighted and deposited in libraries” [33–34]. See also Leitch: “About writing systematic treatises in Kantian fashion, Derrida declared, ‘It is no longer possible to write a great philosophical “machine.” . . . I always operate through small oblique essays” [231].

11. See Ritter and Vanderslice; Houghton et al.; Feal; Perloff, “*Creative Writing among the Disciplines*”; Perloff, “*A Language Initiative for Faculty Members*.”

loff, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mark McGurl, and Ritter and Vanderslice is mirrored in the reconvergence of culturalist with functionalist models of language acquisition, in a way that shows us that science wars are still raging, if not—mercifully—in the epistemological diversions of postmodern hoaxes, then in humanists’ struggle for control of paradigms for their own professional evaluation and reproduction.

When Snow, in his Rede lecture of 1959, remarked on the ignorance among “literary intellectuals” of the second law of thermodynamics, he cast this on the one hand as a kind of illiteracy, and on the other as a kind of incommensurability and a problem of fluency: “I now believe that if I had asked an even simpler question—such as, What do you mean by mass, or acceleration, which is the scientific equivalent of saying, *Can you read?*—not more than one in ten of the highly educated would have felt that I was speaking the same language” [15]. This tension between the idea that literary intellectuals are illiterate (that they are ignorant of the language of the real) and the idea that they merely speak a foreign language (and live, as it were, in another world) reappears in the conflict over who is entitled to argue, in the US academy, and who is hired merely to entertain: in other words, in the conflict over creative writers’ disputed desire for, and entitlement to, membership in the intellectual community of scholars, complemented by scholars’ disputed and disciplined desire for, and entitlement to, membership in the creative community of writers. For we might say that the professional behavior of the self-identified scholar today is needlessly obeisant to the creative spirit on the one hand, and quick to discipline it when it refuses the decorative role of the idiot savant, on the other—of Snow’s “poets conscientiously using scientific expressions, and getting them wrong” [16].¹²

There is, of course, a “bad” essayism, which we might use to mark the presentism, the glibly redactive and associative arguments, and the shamelessly careless *writing* of a surprising proportion of research monographs published in literary studies these days, which seem rushed into print in a bid for topical relevance, bearing all the marks of the behavioral attention-deficit/hyperactivity syndrome professors bemoan in their students. Whether this bad essayism marks only a terminal form of the so-called tyranny of the monograph (as the university press expires, senior scholars compete with junior scholars for the publishing opportunities that remain) or the beginning of a new age of digital articulation, who can say. Regardless, it would not be utterly out of line to describe criticism today as substantively a form of surveillance in which transcription and data storage outpaces reading and writing¹³—which is one way of explaining, perhaps, an overproductive preference for plot and other content summary over analysis, as well as an all-too-frequent recourse to manufactured and self-evidentiary claims.

It is also one explanation for the putative demise of “theory,” understood as a habitus of intensified reflection on the writing of philosophy and the positivity of scholarship itself. In a world of data, what the critic and the National Security Administration have in common, we might say, is a structural and irremediable excess of transcriptive to interpretive capacity—including the capacity for interpretation in multiple languages. If it is difficult enough to be published today, it is still more difficult, in some quarters, to have what one has published be *read*. Scholarship increasingly takes the form of what in ar-

12. Mark McGurl has suggested that that role is in fact “to stand as inspiring exemplars of the unalienated laborer . . . owning the product of his labor of ‘self-expression.’” *The campus creative writer is “in a sense the purest version of the kind of worker, the white-collar professional, that so many college students are preparing to be”* [408].

13. One narrative I have in mind, here, is Friedrich A. Kittler’s reading of the effect of the interposition of the gramophone into language studies [230 ff.]. Too, one might consult Cristina Vatulescu’s reading of the evolution of the character of Soviet secret police files (from synthetic and hermeneutical to purely accumulative) with the development of electronic bugging devices [Vatulescu 258].

chival science are called *records*, which describe both published and nonpublished documents—or, to be more precise, which recognize the massive internal publication stream necessary to run a corporate body and which sequentialize it in organizational life-time [see McKemmish]. In a system in which we must collectively write more than we can possibly read, what articulated research-writing produces is first and foremost a fileable document, which, as John Guillory puts it apropos of the business memo, “might have an audience of one, or none; it might be read once, or never. But however vanishingly ephemeral its interest, it must nonetheless be preserved, that is, *filed*” [113].¹⁴ It might not in fact ever *need* to be read, save—someday—by software designed to quantify its excellence. The idiom of self-aggrandizing positivism in which we advance our own research objects, as vanguard products or ends of local histories, can then be seen as a way of *begging for reading* in a bureaucratic filing world. Little wonder, then, that in an epoch in which our writing is collected, validated, ordered, and stored without being read, literary studies scholars are drawn (against Guillory’s own eminently sensible advice) to models of noncommunication, of nonreading, of incommensurabilities in and across language worlds. For the final lesson of global bureaucratic or perpetual war is that *there will never be enough translators or time*—that our own secular humanist message of protest of that global entrainment, no less than the more overtly practical and sinister “chatter” in the data banks of the NSA, will never be unarchived “in time.”

What I will set out in what follows, then, is a “good” essayism, from within which I mean to sketch the *return* of “theory” not as a body of works but as a set of habits and practices, which, in that earlier, incipiently neoliberal phase of late capital-information glut we used to call “postmodernity” (and postmodernism, its way of life), recognized what I will call, provisionally, the futility of a modernity “out of time.”

Modernity in Time

Snow described the revolution of applied science as a communication from history in an as-yet-unlearned language: “At present we are making do in our half-educated fashion, struggling to hear messages, obviously of great importance, as though listening to a foreign language in which one only knows a few words” [99]. The tension in this statement, in which the novel utility of science, the historical moment of its emergence, and its integration into academic research culture are both translative and translation-resistant, is mirrored in Snow’s self-regard as their bellwether: the universal explanatory power of the “two cultures” thesis, he argues, is reflected in discussions being carried on all over the scientifically developed world, in “languages not accessible to most Englishmen, such as Hungarian, Polish, and Japanese” [54]. In the nationally-ethnically plurilingual scientific *Denkkollektiv* listening, as one body, to a message in a culturally “foreign” language—one which another, nationally-ethnically plurilingual literary *Denkkollektiv* cannot hear, or hears less well, or is learning less quickly—we are given a figure for the dogma of incommensurability that underwrote culture and science wars, in the era of the postmodernism debates, and statist-anarchist conflict, in the era of the cosmopolitanism

14. *In the contemporary practice of what we might call probationary scholarship, that is, research, writing, and publication undertaken first and foremost for promotion and tenure review—the first and sometimes last step of which is organizing documents rather than reading them—it is hard not to see superimposed on the Prussian academic of Kant’s day, his advance to Professor Ordinarius marked by a series of charismatic oral defenses of written works, the Prussian bureaucrat of Weber’s, whose activities are fundamentally and finally custodial of the autonomous material apparatus of office files.*

debates.¹⁵ For Snow's particular form of universalism—and its use in *producing* two cultures—can only fully assert itself within analogies to a pretranslative, particularized state of half-education, through which he can claim for applied science both hieratic privilege and demotic commonality.

Guillory has recently suggested that we think modernity as a discourse positioning literary and scientific writing at antipodes of *knowledge*, between which lies a critical mass of unacknowledged *information*. Setting aside science-war and culture-war debates over the form of science and the content of literature, Guillory proposes a poetics of “the great mass of writing that is neither scientific nor literary but exists primarily to transmit information” [111]. What Guillory has in mind are modern bureaucratic genres such as the memo and the report. In supplementing Guillory's proposal—which does have its charms—more than in rejecting it, one might be forgiven for not being able to bear *not* asking a critical question here. For what Guillory himself has written and published, *making* this argument, remains recognizably and self-evidently, a scholarly *article*—remains, that is to say, within the tradition of so-called scientific writing, in the broadest sense, which Guillory proposes we cease analyzing and thus, in an unavoidable way, politicizing.

A fair and refreshing recommendation, one might say, for those tired of the seemingly never-ending back-and-forth over literary and scientific value. Still, between literary and scientific writing, in Guillory's schema, we can find not only the unacknowledged legislation of modern bureaucratic information genres, but also the modern *essay*. And the essay makes claims on Guillory's own chosen form of the article in a way that memo- and report-writing, innocent of and thus unthreatening to scholarship itself, cannot. If the epistemic antipodes of modernity are two extremes—one literary, one scientific and scholarly—and if this extremity rests on what Guillory calls “surprisingly arbitrary distinctions between genres of writing” [111], what, then, do we do with the genre that embodies (if anything) that *arbitrariness*, rather than embodying one or another antipode of that *distinction*?

In focusing thus on the *composition* of an analysis of modernity—on its *writing*—I mean here to distinguish between two common ways of thinking about modernity, not of course without acknowledging their interrelation. The first is the common sense that modernity is a collective state of human social being, or historical location, or epistemic, yet somehow still representable rupture in human time. One is “in time” in modernity; in other words, “in” history (into which one has perhaps made it “just in time”). The second is the counterintuition toward which self-consciously critical theories of modernity have tended to move.¹⁶ This is the notion of modernity itself, as a concept, idea, or form of self-understanding, as moving *in* time. As a self-diagnosed condition modernity is, in this second sense, a moving target, moving *with* us—not least in *how and as we write about it*

15. *Denkkollektiv* is used here in Ludwik Fleck's sense; see Fleck. *On the cosmopolitanism debates*, see especially Nussbaum et al.; Brennan; Cheah and Robbins, ed.; Robbins; Cheah.

16. *All theories of modernity are critical, in the broadest sense; I use the term here in a post-Kantian sense, suggesting that to posit modernity as critical, with the goal of stabilizing it, is a gesture worth distinguishing from a more dynamic criticism of modernity itself. Though one might of course begin with Kant himself, or with Hegel, or Marx, read against the grain, or, in a twentieth-century context, with the work of the Frankfurt School, perhaps the most useful distinction is between nineteenth- and twentieth-century German philosophy and social theory in general, excluding Nietzsche, and the French poststructuralist phenomenology and deconstruction Nietzsche inspired, or between the entire apparatus of European philosophy and social theory itself and anticolonial critique. Possibly unwisely, I exclude as “critical” theories in this sense those of Weber, for example, in his open contempt for those who refuse a disenchanting world; the structural-functionalist modernization theory of the postwar period in the US; and the work of such latter-day neoconservatives and cryptoliberal hawks as Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama.*

as such. If modernity must then be described, and theorized, in a discourse structured by modernity—that is to say, producing and being produced by its own object—then modernity gives us modern ways of writing about itself, including both modern managerial and modern *academic* bureaucratic genres.

Now, if you see where I'm heading here—toward an argument that what we call “modernity” can never account for itself, fully and completely—you are probably already familiar with the counterargument: to put it as simply as possible, that “indiscipline” is, so to speak, always already the dynamic of discipline in modernity.¹⁷ In other words, to say what I am saying about modernity—that it *cannot* totalize, that it does and must have a limit and an “outside”—is to say nothing about modernity that is not already immanent to it and, as such, modernly reflexive. This is an enormously seductive and, when offered with the imperious condescension it demands, usually victorious argument. I am not going to argue with the argument here, since to do so is no more than to concede the point. What I am going to do instead is to ask about how we choose to live its consequences, as *writers*, as well as verbalizers, of arguments. Must modernity's limitless reflexivity, taken as content—that is, as a transmissible contingent statement of fact—bear in any way on our scholarly practice of form: in other words, on our *writing*? This is a question about *how we talk*, rather than *what we talk about*, when we talk about modernity. I want to suggest that the theory of the essay is an attempt to think this problem of genre *in* writing, or of modernity, as both a topic and a discourse, *in* time.

My argument in what follows will be, first, that while the kind of consequentiality of the compositional “locality” of analysis is certainly open to debate, it is equally certainly not without consequence. Much of the recent debate about the future of the humanities profession (if it has a future) touches this issue obliquely, because it is being carried on by a generation of scholars unavoidably embedded in professional governance structures and understandably anxious about a collective legacy. And the spectacle of mediation in which we scholars point to the praxis limits of our own enterprises, while at the same time avowing those limits as the cost of discussing them, is, while perhaps nothing new, especially *vivid* at this disciplinary-historical moment.

Essay and Form

Symptomatically, there are too many places to start. There is the *Essayismus* formulated by Robert Musil's Ulrich, the man without qualities. There is Adorno's “The Essay as Form.” There is an uneven, nonunifiable, and largely out-of-print body of work on the essay in English studies, and a thriving but often paradoxically antiessayistic body of secondary work on the essay in German.¹⁸ More proximate, perhaps, is the attention paid in black Atlantic studies, for example, to the implications of antinomian double consciousness for writing, *not excluding the writing of scholarship itself*.¹⁹ But I'm going to begin and end here with white Marxism, or rather with what became twentieth-century Marxist literary criticism, insofar as we credit Lukács with developing it into a set of positions making the novel a privileged critical object.

17. For a good (and persuasive) example, see Ferris.

18. See especially Atkins, *Estranging the Familiar*; *Bensmaïa*; *Good*; *Harrison*; *Heilker*; *McCarthy*; *Obaldia*; *Snyder*. *Work in German includes studies by Rohner*; *Haas*; *Bachmann*; *Sloterdijk*; *Müller-Funk*; *Pieper*; *Ernst*; *Nübel*.

19. See Gilroy, who rejected the idea that W. E. B. DuBois's writing can be assimilated to the tradition of the English essay, as some of DuBois's biographers had suggested—and who saw in DuBois's “polyphonic” writing, embodying a “dissatisfaction with all available scholarly languages” [115], a much more radical engagement with modernity understood precisely as slavery.

By biographical custom, the “young” or pre-Marxist Lukács is the author of a body of work repudiated in 1919, following his so-called “conversion.” We might differentiate in a small but meaningful way, however, between the authors of two of the books Lukács published during that period: the apparently somewhat embarrassing *The Soul and the Forms* (1910), and the better-known and more widely respected *The Theory of the Novel* (1916). For we might say that the “very young” Lukács of *The Soul and the Forms* was every bit as invested in the sociality of literary-critical genre as he was, later, in that of the *literary* genre he privileged as a critic.

For the Lukács of *The Soul and the Forms*, the first task of literary criticism is not its selection of a critical object but the selection of its own form. Criticism is first of all a question of the genres of criticism. It is a question posed most urgently, for Lukács, by critical writing demonstrating qualities conventionally sought in the critical object itself. These qualities include: rereadability, in the form of a complexity not exhausted by any single progressive interpretation; paradox and ironic tension; and “likeness” (*Ähnlichkeit*), Lukács’s term for that complexity placing knowledge of the world in ironic tension with life *in it*.²⁰ For Lukács, the essay, a modern form reuniting the spheres of science and art, on the one hand, but unable to restore itself to premodern direct contact with “life,” on the other, is the form criticism takes when it cannot avoid, or chooses not to avoid, the question of its own objectivation.

For this “very young” Lukács, the question of criticism is then fundamentally the question of the essay. The *articulation* of the essay is not, for Lukács, a matter of breaking new ground in the presentation of novel *content*. Nor, on the other hand, is it merely a matter of good writing: the definition of the essay as *Gutgeschreibensein*, Lukács says, is an “anarchic” confusion of criticism with art itself [*Seele* 8; *Soul* 2]. The essay as criticism “is” neither criticism *nor* art. Nor is it a subvention or confusion of one with (or by) the other. If it “is” anything, the essay-as-criticism is “conceptuality as sensed experience” (*die Begrifflichkeit . . . als sentimentales Erlebnis*), an art form yet not an art form, in a proposition uniquely noncontradictory for the essay [*Seele* 15; *Soul* 7]. Lukács contrasts the essay-as-criticism, remaining productively rereadable, with accumulative “machine part” (*Maschinenteil*) criticism, discarded as soon as a new and better model is developed [*Seele* 9; *Soul* 2].

As Peter Uwe Hohendahl has observed [221], Lukács’s argument suggests that a “general” literary public sphere has been dislocated in the historical modernity theorized by Weber, Lukács’s friend and mentor, and that the tensions of the essay form articulate this contraction itself. The primitive integration of *Wissenschaft* with *Kunst* becomes the modern differentiation of “Platonism” from poetry, which the essay both accepts and refuses, since it rerepresents the premodern without being able to transcend or abandon (its own) modernity. This supplemental or residual figuration of a posthistoric end of philosophy in literature is never meant to signal a new unity; instead, the false unity in which it can never be more than a fragment is positioned over the “real” unity lost. The

20. Lukács, *Die Seele und die Formen* 21; *Soul and Form* 10. Like Lukács’s first major book, *The Evolution of Modern Drama* (A modern dráma fejlődésének története, 1911), *The Soul and the Forms* was first written and published in Hungarian (as *A lélek és a formák*) in 1910. The second edition, published in German the following year, was revised and expanded, with the order and the titles of essays changed, the conclusion to “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” transformed, and two entirely new essays (on Charles-Louis Philippe, originally written in Hungarian, and on Paul Ernst, originally written in German) added. My own reading of *The Soul and the Forms* is confined, here, to the German edition. For an invaluable analysis of differences between the Hungarian and German editions, along with a reflection on “the passage of *Soul and Form* from Hungarian to German, its migration to a language and culture in which philosophy is ‘at home’” [4], see Fairley.

essay itself pursues philosophical universals, embedded in the time which, merely passing, particularizes them. This is “poetized Platonism” as paradoxy: the both/and or “as well as” that Lukács uncovers in the essays on Rudolf Kassner, Kierkegaard, Novalis, Theodor Storm, and Charles-Louis Phillippe that follow “On the Nature and Form of the Essay,” the opening aria of *The Soul and the Forms*. If the Romantic irony of the fragment was finally an *affirmative* form of lament for a lost fully rounded world, Lukács, writing in the decade producing the Great War, sensed in a new century a more radically civilized discontent. In the violences of the essay, modernity tears itself from that ironized world.

Writing of Schopenhauer, the Lukács of *The Soul and the Forms* hesitates between the modern Romantic fragment as ironizing (and thus refusing, while refusing to relinquish, unity) and a nonfragmentary or “essayistic” form of incompletion—what Carol Jacobs, in her reading of Benjamin’s use of the term *Bruchstück*, retranslated into English as “broken piece” [see Jacobs and de Man]. Understood as a broken piece, rather than as a fragment, the parergon is not a preliminary or unfinished version of the truth. Schopenhauer’s aphoristic *Parerga* “contain” (*enthalten*), Lukács says, the system of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*; “thus, they will always face or confront the system; even if it had already been realized, they would not be an application [*Anwendung*] of the system but always a recreation [*Neuschaffung*].”²¹

Most of the rest of the story, how the “very young” Lukács became the young Lukács, via Hegel, is known. In 1912, Lukács had inquired of Max Weber about the possibility of an *Habilitation* at Heidelberg. Weber warned him that his “essayistic” thinking and writing would be received with hostility by Weber’s colleagues:

Yesterday I deliberately sat next to [Wilhelm] Windelband and . . . turned the conversation to you [Lukács]. Windelband made some casual, objectively insignificant remarks about your essays, though not necessarily unfriendly ones. But as I expected, the essay form is remote from Windelband and he made some sharp comments on it. I made some guarded remarks on your essays, and about you I stressed that you are, in essence, a systematic thinker and already beyond the essayistic period. He listened politely but, as always, without apparent interest. [qtd. and trans. in Kadarkay 191]

Weber thus marks the cost of Lukács’s subsequent transformation, in professional but also vocational terms. The so-called Heidelberg suitcase of 1917, discovered after Lukács’s death, embodies the closure of essayism in the turn to systematic work, which, for entirely different reasons, would never earn Lukács an *Habilitation* anyway.²² But *The Theory of the Novel*, a work that Weber himself openly hated, already contains the seed of that turn, through which the critic’s essayism is systematized in a critical object. In the 1962 preface written for a reprint of that work, Lukács remarked,

At first it was meant to take the form of a series of dialogues: a group of young people withdrawing from the war psychosis of their environment, just as the story-tellers of the Decameron had withdrawn from the plague; they try to un-

21. Seele 31, trans. modified; Soul 18. Arguably, the tension between “application” and “recreation” here is captured by the verb *enthalten*, which one might also translate “comprise,” signaling dynamically transitive lateral equivalence: the “seizure” or grasp implied in *com-prehendere*, rather than the holding together implied in *con-tenere*.

22. This was a suitcase into which Lukács stuffed all of his papers in 1917, left on deposit with the Deutsche Bank in Heidelberg, and supposedly forgot about. As Kadarkay has shown, however, Lukács programmatically rather than casually forgot the suitcase, renewing the deposit account for it at least once in 1933 while traveling from Moscow on Comintern business [see Kadarkay 182].

derstand themselves and one another by means of conversations which gradually lead to the problems discussed in the book—the outlook on a Dostoevskian world. On closer consideration I dropped this plan and wrote the book as it stands today. [12]

The Lukács of *The Soul and the Forms* wrote of the essay as a “judgment, but the essential . . . thing about it is not the verdict . . . but the process of judging [Seele 31; *Soul* 18]. In *The Theory of the Novel*, marking the beginning (if not the end) of his maturity, Lukács substituted the novel for the essay, as *the* form addressing the life of the problematic individual in a world of constitutive systems. It is the modern novel, Lukács wrote, which gave form to time as *durée*. *Durée* as the “concrete and organic continuum” of life is the only totality possible in modernity—which is to say that modernity, for the Lukács of *The Theory of the Novel*, can only ever “be” *in time* [121–27]. But the paradox of this argument as *embedded in a critical method* is that it requires, however provisionally, the re-creation of a position of observation extracted from, taken “out of,” that time. To localize totality in the temporality of the novel, the novel is rendered as an object, *the* privileged object of literary criticism, whose discourse is now fatally, finally demarcated from the object’s own. What we have here, in other words, is a criticism that can no longer be quite what it also was, in Lukács’s even, so to speak, “younger” thought: an essayism.²³

Essayism and Novelism

Three aspects of what Clifford Siskin calls “novelism” are relevant here. First, that the rise of the object of study, the novel, involves a subordination of writing to the written object, a subordination and an *objectivation* by which a discourse and an institution are tactically concealed [“Rise of Novelism” 423–25]. Second, that this subordination is crucial to the formation of modern disciplinarity, in which the division of disciplines is a division fundamentally grounded on forms of writing [426]. Third, that disciplinarity as such, for what we now call English studies, was instrumental to the conservative constitution of a British nation against and in competition with the challenge from revolutionary France, and that it left a mark on critical practice in the US colony, to this day [432].

In Siskin’s critical narrative of novelism, the dramatically essayistic self-reflexivity of eighteenth-century English writing (in Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley) invited, and got, strong discipline. Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson (by convention, the first English novelists) are instrumental in naturalizing or renaturalizing writing as mimesis, stabilizing or restabilizing the reflective relation of writing to truth and defining clear roles and positions for the writer-producer and the reader-interpreter, creating the modern literary critic in the process [431]. Novelism is the generation of an object generically distinct from critical writing, in a form that modernizes critical practice, taking it, so to speak, “out of time.”

Siskin is unwilling to see any unmediated role for *the* essay in this endeavor. Elsewhere, he suggests that in early nineteenth-century Britain, the essay itself functioned as a *container* of French revolutionary “systems,” rather than as their sworn enemy (the eighteenth-century situation)—and thus displaced the system as single final cause into the multiple specializations of disciplinary division and disabled the system’s power to effect total (revolutionary) change. “Blaming the system” is, then, in Siskin’s view, a

23. Now, Lukács did criticize himself for reifying the novel in this way. And his mature work, as is well known, is characterized by a turn from the novel as genre to realism as mode. This does not, however—in my own reading, at least—diminish the fundamental privilege he grants to the novel as a (the) point of departure.

gesture integral to the reproduction of liberalism ["Year of the System" 13]. In suggesting that today we live in an historical period reconfiguring the relationship of writing, print, and reading, much like the period that produced "novelism," Siskin wonders aloud in a final footnote: "Are complaints about its inadequacy no longer just a constitutive feature of System itself, but a signal of a substantial conceptual and generic change? And if so, what of Literature as a discipline, with its binary of primary vs secondary texts embedded within a seemingly endless flow of essay?" ["Year of the System" 31]. This, it would, seem, is a question better asked than answered.

What we have here, I want to suggest, is a name for the "habilitation" of the scholar even (or especially) today, at a time when nonsystematic research has been integrated into literary studies in the form of what we in departments of English call Creative Writing. My point is that humanities scholars who fancy themselves interdisciplinary still have something to learn from the discipline and indiscipline of Creative Writing in the university, which one might read as a space into which nationalist English and US studies diverted the energies of imported continental European "theory" in order to *contain* them. If there is a dismayingly persistent self-evidence of the local disciplinary object of English and US studies today, despite strenuous attempts to transnationalize it, then we might say that Creative Writing is the discipline that needs no discipline, that has been successful precisely by having no discipline. Or, that it is the discipline in which those who *resist* discipline hold a certain nonimaginary power over those who embrace it, in an inversion of the combat structure in scholarly fields.

The lamented and celebrated "death of theory" in the humanities is then really the death of a certain "essayism": of a certain consensus (which was far from uncontested, to be sure) about our "research" as *writing*—in other words, as a sociality lived in time. I am not talking about an "oversight," at least in the ordinary sense of that term—an inadvertent and remediable failure to see the implications of theory for practice. I am talking, rather, about the programmatic suppression of rhetoricity, or what Guillory, in another context, calls the "forgetting" (and the "forgetting of the forgetting") of rhetoric [126]. It is easy to pillory fashionable French theorists and their US interpreters for their argumentative incoherence when we bracket the real-time *compositional* practices that produce, disseminate, and archive academic-theoretic argument, and into which what we call "high theory" has to be seen as having attempted to intervene—sometimes for the worse, to be sure, but sometimes for the better. Produced largely by and for the scholarly elite trained at and employed by the research-intensive (or other ultraselective) institution, such argument is intensively mediated by the print culture of one intensively defined genre, the scholarly article, and the forms of regulation that manage it, including peer review and promotion and tenure review. The theory debates of our redaction industry are not, in other words, substantively *verbal* debates, however they may be advanced and indeed driven by the charismatic conference circuit. Rather, they are debates between composers of published works, whose composition is anticipated by research standards that, in literary studies at least, are equally standards for argument and thus, nonverbally, for *writing*.

Genred Bodies

"Two essays," Lukács wrote in *The Soul and the Forms*, "can never contradict each other [*einander widersprechen*]: each creates [*erschafft*] a different world" [*Seele* 24; *Soul* 11]. This succinct formulation of what we would now call a culturalist model of discourse condenses, in compact form, the targets of Walter Benn Michaels's recent polemics in *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. "Posthistoricism," Michaels's term

for the collusions of theory with neoliberalism, assisted in bringing Cold War history to a close by replacing the argued belief in socialism with an identified difference of bodies and cultures, materializing or giving differential bodily “shape” to the signifier and subtracting its ideological intention and meaning. In this, the antiessentialist, deconstructive, or hybridist destabilization of identity, in academic theory, is self-deludingly complicit in valorizing (as negation) the very same anti-ideological and antiargumentative category that explicitly essentialist and identitarian practice, in the new social movements, openly affirms.

Michaels’s first example is the work of poet-scholar Susan Howe, whose insistence on the materiality of Emily Dickinson’s texts illuminates, for Michaels, a typical posthistoricist shift from the interpretation of a text to the reader’s experience of its meaning. The eighty-six blank manuscript pages of Thomas Shepard’s autobiography, which Howe identifies as “text” excised in editorial redaction and publication, are for Michaels emblems of this turn—in his paraphrase of Howe, “they are part of what the reader ‘reads’ or ‘sees’ without reference to the maker’s purpose” [6]. The equivocation in Michaels’s reading of *The Birth-mark*—he notes that Howe’s position ultimately defends the writer’s *intention* against the editor, going on to make the bulk of his argument against Paul de Man’s intensification of reader experience as “noise”—is a clue to the category missing from his analysis, which one suspects he would not be obliged to reject out of hand. For Howe’s shift is not from the intention of the author to the experience of the reader—a shift which maintains the separation between author and reader—but from the intention of the author as encoded in an always already *published* text, as the object of the literary critic, to the productive context of writing itself, which confuses that separation, since writing is what the literary critic herself is always already doing, too. For Howe, the blank pages in Shepard’s autobiography are not excised materialities to be restored to a liberated reader, as Michaels appears to suggest; they are, rather, emblems of *possible* writing, of writing (not reading) “in” time, which will always include measured yet unmeasurable intervals of *not* writing, of activity producing nothing that cannot be read. Howe’s “The reader reads empty paper” is ironic, pointing to the impossibility of not-writing being read, rather than declaring belief in the possibility of—and subsequently demanding, as Michaels seems to suggest—a somatic reading. Reading as interpreting the critical object *stops* at the blank pages; in that silence, one relinquishes the book altogether. Not mystical silence, but a moment’s waiting, an interval before writing, which is to say an invitation *to* writing. Howe’s antinomian Dickinson is defined by her negativity, her preference not to publish: the determination of the scholar-editor *not to let this go*, to publish non-publication, is itself Howe’s object of study. If Michaels is entirely correct in his reading of the dyad of Howe’s position—on the one hand asserting the authority of Dickinson as violated by her editors, on the other hand ascribing to Dickinson’s authority an indeterminacy impossible for authority as such—that, we might say, reflects Howe’s own marginal status as an uncredentialed scholar-poet, whose mixture of institutionally defined roles and genres requires the assertion of authority (one’s own as interpreter and that of one’s critical objects as objects of interpretation) as a scholar, on the one hand, and the staged “relinquishment” of authority as a writer, on the other. This dynamic is the very ground of *The Birth-mark* as a work of generically heterodox autobiographical scholarship:

Mosses Moses Moby muffled maybe

I am drawn toward the disciplines of history and literary criticism but in the dawning distance a dark wall of rule supports the structure of every letter, record, transcript: every proof of authority and power. I know records are compiled by winners, and scholarship is in collusion with Civil Government. I know

*this and go on searching for some trace of love's infolding through all the paper
in all the libraries I come to. [4]*

It is the grace of scholarship. I am indebted to everyone. [39]

Howe suggests that the antinomian controversy of 1636–37 was the founding struggle of North American literary historiography, and one still very much *forming* the US scene, in the conflict between literary writing and literary scholarship. Indeed, the US university was *constituted* in this very struggle, as Howe's anecdotes of Yale and the madness of Anne Hopkins will attest. But Michaels appears to read *The Birth-mark* strictly for argument, as he might any generically orthodox work of contemporary scholarship: in other words, from within precisely the "inclosure" that Howe, not unaware that it is in vain, protests.

If I may put this another way: one may read the emphasis on the materiality of the signifier in the "high" phase of theory, which Michaels finds entirely contiguous with the identitarian personalization that ostensibly rebelled against it, as a form of self-consciousness about the position of the writer, rather than (or in addition to), as Michaels sees it, the reader. The *reception* of a text presumes, at least in the first instance, if not necessarily subsequently, an initial product, the text as fact and artifact to be received. It presumes, in other words, a cessation, permanent or temporary, in the production of the text, for which our usual name is publication; and it takes that for granted, in the constitution of a field of published texts that is there before interpretation ever begins. This is just another way of saying, for example, that no one *can* compose a dissertation—and one really *ought not* to compose a monograph—on material that does not yet exist, in the sense that includes authorized consensus on its importance for, and therefore clearly objectivized distance *from*, contemporary scholarship. It is also a way of understanding, perhaps, why the second (or third or fourth) book of the tenured literary scholar today is almost invariably a set of articles gathered together, as written "in time," in a form of relaxation of disciplinary critical distance.

Whether we like it or not, it *does* matter who is arguing (or writing), among other reasons because in the (now severely) restricted economy of publication, every instance of publication points to, or asks about, nonpublication: about the general economy of writing yet to be done. This, perhaps, is one way to contemplate the predicament facing junior scholars told by university presses (as they will now be told, again, for what will perhaps be the last time) that they no longer publish "first" books. Scholarly argument, as Michaels knows quite well, does not take place in a unified global verbal space but in locally different languages, which need to be translated. And it does not take place in a free or formless multitude of forms but in two localized forms or instances of sanction: the article and the monograph. Literary scholarship constitutes itself in these genres, the conventions of which require one to declare objects of analysis, be they (these days) literary or cultural texts (including other literary-scholarly writing). And the scholar approaching the customs gate with his declaration must wait in a different line than those traveling unencumbered by transitional objects. The scholar may write, but she cannot *be* a creative writer, or primary producer of primary texts; the creative writer may engage in scholarly disputation, but she is not and cannot therein *be* a scholar. To place emphasis on the "materiality of the signifier" is not—not interestingly, at least—to make claims on behalf of an admittedly impossible somatic writing, so much as it is to materialize genre in the plainest sense, to force its recognition as an arbitrary constraining force which, as a modality of *technē*, cannot ever simply and straightforwardly be escaped, but which some of us elect to naturalize (by simply ignoring it, or declaring it a frivolous or irrelevant concern) or denaturalize, in powerful disciplinary gestures that locate us literally in a

field. The materiality of scholarly genre is the materiality of the profession as a space of discipline, not free argument.

The interruption of arguments by identities as somatized and materially incommensurable bodies, which Michaels deplures, is better understood, then, as a metaphorization, within academic political dispute, of the interruption of argument by genre: the materialization of the constraints of publication, including publication itself *as* constraint, in which all argument must take place. An argument uninterruptible by genre—unconstrained by localized disciplinary conventions of writing “reviewed” on request by one’s peers—is nothing if not illimitably textualist, in precisely the sense often ascribed pejoratively to Derrida, who was actually everywhere attentive to the *projection* of free textuality by the material book publication code that contains and produces it. The adoption of a genre—a decision made in *writing* an argument—is itself an argument about the type of expression, including its range and scale, available to writing in that genre: as is changing or switching or mixing genres and the professional declarations of affiliation and position, in an institutional matrix or field of professional identities (defined by discipline, field, specialty, research topic, institutional affiliation, academic rank, and various measures of prestige incorporating one’s entire history of educational credentialization) that change or switch or mix with them. The attention Derrida pays, in “The Law of Genre,” to the typography and page layout, as well as the material publication history of Blanchot’s *La folie du jour*, is in this sense less the mark of a claim for free writing behind or beyond the work, than the proleptic corporealization of a *possible* writing ahead of the book, not contained in advance by its material structure. It is, we might say, simply a way of declaring oneself a writer.

Writer and Critic

And writers and critics, as we all know, speak different languages. In the United States, writers, especially writers produced by the academic creative writing industry—now a form of majority—are notoriously unwilling to argue. To the extent that they want either to imagine or to describe their experience, rather than argue for a belief, and that that desire is embodied in the sheer demographic pressure of creative writing’s popularity rather than in any persuasion, they offer an institutional analogue of the multicultural landscape of demographic refiguration in the world purportedly outside the academy. We might go so far as to suggest that the disciplinary reconfiguration that produced a surge in the institutional power of Creative Writing is in fact the source of the changes it observes. Why else would practitioners of “creative nonfiction,” a novelized form of the essay stripped of any argument, have lobbied so hard—and lately, observing the language of job advertisements and other forms of official research discourse, so successfully—for the professional acceptance of that term as a genre and field distinct from the *essay* or the *autobiography* scrutinized by authors of scholarly articles on Montaigne or Rousseau?²⁴ We must ask ourselves if scholars—feeling, for reasons as yet not fully probed,

24. Amanda Anderson has argued that far from having “died,” what we call Theory has successfully assimilated the various forms of personalization, from “confessional” criticism to the “turns” to ethics and affect, which subsequently arose to challenge high theory as excessively abstract [see Anderson 1–3]. I think the rise of “creative nonfiction” suggests otherwise, and that to some extent, Anderson is rewriting as the personalization of abstract academic theory (and thus as a continuation of argument about the stakes of theory) something that was every bit as much an exploration of alternative writing practices—including writing in heterodox genres—highly self-conscious about probationary disciplinary and post-tenure “indiscipline.” In this connection, see Torgovnick.

that things had somehow gone too far in the 1970s and 80s—colluded wittingly or unwittingly in promoting the autonomy of Creative Writing, despite the inevitability of sharing, and losing, scarce institutional capital to it, precisely as a way of containing the threat that *writerly* or “essayistic” high theory had posed to scholarship. Could anything be more self-destructive for a dwindling humanities professoriate today?

Much of the critical reflexivity on which we pride ourselves as being interdisciplinary is silent on the question of whether irruptions of indiscipline into argument might imply violations of the practice of genre as well—and if so, what that might articulate, so to speak, about our articulation. It is in precisely that timeless perfection of critical modernity, we might say, rather than in its lapses and failures, that we lose sight of the law of scholarly genre. Routine interfaculty antagonism notwithstanding, we might say that the hopelessly formalist craft language of creative writing (and perhaps more importantly, of the creative writing *profession*), rather than developing in an anachronistic parallel world segregated in literary-critical history, is, in contemporary terms at least, a *player* or perhaps even an agent in that restoration within literary studies. Its incommensurability as a professional language serves not only the secessionist creative writing faculty but that portion of the scholarly faculty who experienced Derrida’s self-consciously and aggressively libidinous writing as an unwelcome erotic advance. The shaping of Michaels’s signifier by a linguistic culturalism ostensibly *argued* in or through the reception of Derrida is then the materialization in the literature department of a student and faculty body that does not want to argue, that wants merely to create—and that serves those “against” theory as well as it does those “for” it.

If the events of 2001 have made anything clear, it is that the *Öffentlichkeit* of the imperial centers is now being confronted, methodically, determinedly, and of course violently, by “groups” who no longer want *first* to argue their points. Terrifying as this may be—as it is—it will have to be endured, as an historical process, in the unraveling (and perhaps, of course, the restoration) of neocolonial power. The containment of colonial and neocolonial violence by the postmodern Cold War gave us a form of rational madness that, for all its catastrophic potential, in fact held fast; the collapse of its enclosure has liberated madness of its ideological reason, and we are left with, among other social forces, revitalized militant forms of religiosity, in which we can see modernity moving in time again. That such religiosity is itself a form of, or may contain forms of, argument is something that Michaels, for his part, does not yet seem fully willing to entertain. “The inspired,” as he puts it in an hyperbole linking theorist to terrorist, “don’t care whether their beliefs are true, and we have already noted the appropriateness, indeed the inevitability, of the eagerness for martyrdom once the question of truth has been deemed irrelevant” [77]. It is this institutionalized, structured, and *secessionist* “religiosity” of Creative Writing in the university—and the purported surge of purported desire of the *student body* for its primary practice—that the scholar most adamantly resists, and for which the internal struggle of “theory” with itself is a functional analogue.

But essayism, or modernity in time, is our future only if both sides lose. Ian Hunter has read the “moment of theory” in the humanities as a victory for the charismatic asceticism of Christian university metaphysics, marginalized by secular modernity and briefly, successfully resurgent in the 1970s and 1980s. I think he is correct, and that the next chapter in that history will tell how in literary studies, traditional scholars, fighting back, succeeded in diverting the energies of high-theoretic performative self-cultivation into the departmental holding pen we call Creative Writing, where the formal protocols they control make it stay, and which few creative writers in the university have the intellectual training to challenge—or even to comprehend.

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