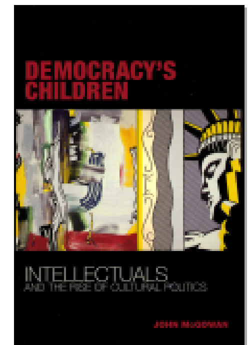
Democracy's Children



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CHAPTER 1

At the 1986 MLA Convention

I wrote this essay in January 1987. I was up for tenure that term and knew that I would get it. Six years earlier I had lost my first tenure-track job when the department had been folded in the recession during Reagan's first year in office. I had done adjunct teaching and worked for a university press for two years before finding my second tenure track job. Now tenure was imminent and I was feeling both survivor's guilt (of the twenty-five students who started graduate school with me at SUNY-Buffalo in 1974, thirteen received their PhDs, but only seven ever got tenure)—and something else that was harder to define. I was afraid of losing my irony, losing my perspective, of becoming one with this role of professor. In my first job, the department had responded to being under siege by sending around a "monthly activities report" that had "books published" as the first category. Churning out articles that were more often rejected than accepted for publication while also writing short stories that were always rejected, I swore that I would never write a word of literary criticism after (if) I got tenure. But now I knew that wasn't true. My apprenticeship had done its job; I now thought in the form and would continue to work in it. Like the dyer's hand, my nature was subdued. Or so I feared. This essay was to prove to myself that I could write in another, less academic, form—and to make a public pledge that I would maintain my integrity within the academic forms.

I didn't have the right connections at the time to get this essay into any hands that could print it while it was still timely. After one journal had turned it down, the next two said it was too late to be of use to them. Friends who read the essay liked it—and one regularly had his graduate students read it over the next four

years. I include it in this book, despite the fact that I no longer agree with everything I wrote, because I still think it captures an ambivalence felt by many graduate students and junior professors, an ambivalence that is seldom publicly expressed. I have resisted the temptation to revise it, just as I will resist the temptation to explain here what in the essay I still believe, what I would now renounce.

This essay had a companion piece on the job market. But I can now locate neither a hard copy nor a computer file. In the jobs essay, I used some of the statistics now found in chapter 2 and some of the arguments. But the two main points of the jobs essays were that the MLA's reported statistics about the employment of PhDs were wildly inaccurate and that we were fast headed toward a two-tiered profession in which tenured professors teach majors while graduate students and adjuncts teach freshman and sophomore English. This is no longer news. And it should not have been news in 1987, but it was. The job market for English PhDs had been bad since the early 70s, but the mandarins of the MLA refused to see what was happening. When I was teaching composition for $900 a section in 1979 (the year after receiving my PhD), I ran into a Berkeley professor I knew in the supermarket. He asked me what I was doing. I told him I was teaching part-time at the University of San Francisco and still trying to find a tenure-track job. What kind of job would I like, he inquired. I was taken aback, but replied that a small liberal arts college would be my ideal. "Well," he said, "have you called Reed College? It's a fine school."

The MLA's job statistics at that time came from the reports of degree-granting departments. That is, each department told the MLA that it had awarded this many PhDs in the past year, and that this number of those PhDs had gotten teaching jobs. My anecdote suggests how much the professors in those departments knew about their students' experiences on the job market. The result was that the MLA statistics showed less than 20 percent of recent PhDs in non-tenure-track positions at a time when government statistics showed that over 40 percent of college instruction was being done by part-timers.

The story of my essay's fate sealed my sense of the MLA's willed blindness. I submitted it to Profession, *which bounced it to the* ADE Bulletin. *I then negotiated with the editor of the* Bulletin *over the next 30 months. He finally accepted that my critique of the MLA's statistics was valid. (And the MLA subsequently changed the way it gathered its data and became somewhat more sensitive to the plight of PhDs.) But he would only print the first half of the essay. He would not accept the "over-passionate" sociological analyses of its second half, in which I had said that the differentiation occurring in our profession simply mirrored the similar differentiation occurring throughout the workplace as companies relied*

increasingly on part-time labor while executive salaries sky-rocketed. I wish I hadn't lost the essay because I remember it as passionate, cogent, and steely. (So maybe I should be glad I can't find it; it could hardly be better than my memory paints it.) In any case, I refused to let them publish a truncated version and withdrew the essay. I then submitted it to College English, *which turned it down with the comment that they refrained from picking fights with the MLA. I threw it in a drawer after that—and, four moves later, maybe it's in some box up in my attic.*

This story has one final grace note. Two years later my wife did a workshop with the editor of the ADE Bulletin. *She told him of her connection to me. To which he replied: "Yes, it was a well-written essay. I was sorry that it didn't work out; I hated to deprive him of a publication."*

THE SETTING

The Marriott Marquis was notorious before a girder had been slapped into place. They tore down the Helen Hays Theater to build this convention hotel. "Marquis," I take it, is a stab at the kind of cutesy pun that earns coffeehouses names like "Just Desserts" or "The Edible Complex." The new hotel contains a theater, with the accompanying marquee to announce the current offering. Even more spectacularly, the facade also sports a four-story high advertisement for Kodak, which currently features an idyllic snowscape of an unreality only achievable by Kodachrome, or by invocations of nature at the corner of Broadway and 45th Street. This Cyclops eye so completely deforms the building that you hope it is a joke, a joyous postmodern celebration of Times Square's vulgarity, an example of what we have learned from Las Vegas.

If we take the Marriott Marquis as paradigmatic, however, postmodernism provides neither joy nor light nor peace nor help for pain. The building's designers can only manage to play out the aristocratic implications of its name by offering the standard symbols of extravagance found in various Hyatt Regencies from coast to coast: glass elevators lined with chrome and glitter lights, the by-now inevitable emptied out center around which the rooms are arranged, and large plants meant to convey a lush tropical feel. The Marriott utterly lacks the various Hyatts' conviction of their grandeur. If the Marriott winked at us, asking us to revel in these banal and glitzy codes of sumptousness, we could bring our Venturi and Jencks to bear and talk about how the hotel successfully speaks both to the cognoscenti and to those who swallow it whole. And, if such

were the case, the primary theatrical metaphor would work perfectly. The hotel would resemble any number of contemporary Broadway plays, especially the musicals, which thrive on a pumped-up energy that they also fully admit is contrived and unreal.

The Marriott doesn't even manage to pump up sufficient energy to start playing off its primary signals. One problem lies in the cheapness of the basic materials used: poured concrete, the deadly white wood that cheap bookcases are made from, thin carpeting of the type that surrounds swimming pools, and some unidentifiable fake leather substance to cover the benches (not chairs) of the lobby. All the glitter appears only a way to hide the building's essential mediocrity, and the glitter's lack of conviction suggests the designers' awareness that no true extravagance resides here. The hotel speaks most clearly about a corporation's desire to do something as cheaply as possible and of the architects' disgust with the limitations within which they had to work, and with the signals of aristocratic opulence they were required to supply. The true metaphor here is not that of the theater but of that other denizen of Times Square: the prostitute. The Marriott displays all the prostitute's self-hatred even as she or he works to keep up the appearances on which livelihood is dependent. The cynical disgust, both with the world and with oneself, that is indicated by the shoddy materials and workmanship suggests that no honorable work nor ennobling public identity is possible in this postmodern world.

Yet the rooms in this hotel are very nice. They are also recognizably postmodern, but are utterly relieved of the burdens of public appearance. Both Victorian clutter and harsh modernist asceticism have been banished. The furniture is modest, comfortable, and usually a bit on the small side, deliberately dwarfed. The colors are those muted greys, roses, and slate blues that have become postmodernism's hallmark, while the arrangement works to open large, usable spaces. These are rooms clearly designed with the idea always firmly in mind of the people who will use them. These warm, witty, and comfortable rooms affirm the coteries (beyond family, the individual firm or business or university) formed by professionals, who gather at conventions for good uplifting talk about the things that concern and interest them. These rooms bespeak a faith in certain kinds of conversation, certain kinds of quasi-public friendship, that somehow escape the deformities of both the larger public world and of overheated local intimacies. The dream lingers of a work world in which we can honorably pursue what interests us and strikes us as serious, as

does the hope that we can find an appropriate community of peers with whom to work.

What is the overall message the Marriott sends us? The arts (and maybe this is true of many other pursuits) have been talking to themselves for quite some time now. And the conversation is damned good. Within the small worlds of the various disciplines, exciting, serious, and innovative work gets done. Only when the connection with the general culture is made does a certain embarrassment, even self-disgust, surface. The translation of the work into the marketplace inevitably changes it, if only because the fundamental motives for the work shift from intrinsic to extrinsic ones. "Trade mars everything it touches," claims Thoreau. Postmodernism is particularly vulnerable to self disgust because it has abandoned the heroic modernist adversarial stance toward commercial culture. Defeated by capitalism's endurance and the seeming decline of all political alternatives (both left and right) into barbarisms that make the West look benign, the postmodernist accepts the market's right to rule. Yet he can't quite lose his resentment at what the market makes him do and hangs on to an attenuated dream of an alternative space, a humanly scaled room of his own.

THE PLAYERS

Into the Marriott—and several surrounding hotels—last December came some twelve thousand college professors and graduate students to listen to over two thousand papers on various topics, to interview candidates for teaching jobs (or to be interviewed), to browse through book exhibits set up by over two hundred publishers, to gossip, to drink, to make contacts, and to see old friends. The gathering constitutes a large, but hardly representative, sampling of America's English and modern language teachers. Not representative because the MLA, for one thing, is largely a young woman's and man's convention, attracting those who are on the make. Prominent older scholars do make an appearance, and so do the older teachers shut up in hotel rooms most of the day, interviewing job candidates. But most of the papers are given by twenty-five- to forty-five-year-olds who are still in the process of constructing careers, either striving for tenure at their own universities or looking to move up the ladder by finding a job at a more prestigious school. Tenured professors who are content with their lot in life or, at least, have resigned them-

selves to their place in the profession's pecking order have little incentive to attend. Half the talk (easily) centers on summarizing your career's progress since the last time you met your fellow conversationalist; such talk can only embarrass if you have not published much recently or had job offers from other schools. Much better to stay home with the family for Christmas than to submit yourself to the humiliating comparison of your success with those of people you went to graduate school with. You'll go to the convention when that book you've been working on for eight years is finally finished and has been accepted by a publisher. Local success, prestige, and security must suffice the eighty percent of professors who regularly skip the convention.

I am an MLA junkie. Each year I tell myself I will not go the next year, that I will free myself from this bondage to my career and my ambitions; but I am helpless in front of this disease and have attended eleven of the last twelve conventions and the last ten in a row. I went to my first convention (in Chicago) despite having gotten no interviews and sat in a college friend's apartment in Hyde Park weeping in front of my best friend from graduate school (who had two interviews) and his wife, feeling utterly excluded from the world I wanted to join. I skipped the next year because I still had no interviews and was no longer naive enough to think that attending the convention could do me any good. I had no need to repeat the previous year's suffering; I was busy trying to imagine other careers for myself that I could stomach. The next year—after teaching composition part-time—I had three interviews and landed a job in a Humanities Department at a large state university. It was a fine job, except for one drawback. The department was under siege from various David Stockman types in the administration. So I simply continued to look for other jobs—albeit unsuccessfully—and attended each successive convention because I always had an interview or two. I began to acquire a group of MLA friends, people I never saw, talked to, or corresponded with except at or in relation to the convention. After a few years, I began to realize that I was actually enjoying myself, even if three quarters of what I witnessed outraged me. Love's dominance in this love-hate relationship became absolutely clear when I finally got myself a second job (after another year and a half of semi-employment following my first department's dismemberment) and continued to attend the convention despite any pressing need. The disease I am trying to anatomize is my own.

For years I attended the convention and never went to a single paper, too busy socializing and sightseeing in this year's city, too full of contempt for (and, doubtless envy of) these earnest and ambitious professors of literature whose closed shop I could not join. Three or four years ago I began to listen to various talks, at first those of friends or of people it was professionally prudent of me to meet, then (in the past two years) to papers on topics that interested me or by critics whose work I had reason to admire or to be curious about. I had crossed some crucial boundary; I was now one of those earnest and ambitious professors myself and went to the convention, in large part, to place my ear to the ground and make sure I was fully aware of what it is we are doing this year. As anyone even remotely connected to literary criticism knows, the past ten years have presented us with a dizzying number of movements, positions, and theories, many of which have the shelf life of a harlequin romance. The convention, presumably, allows you to recognize what's past, what's current, and what's to come.

Reflecting on my selection criterion now, I recognize the true test is whether I have read anything by the speakers featured in a given session. I almost invariably go to hear people that I have heard good things about but have never gotten around to reading. They get twenty minutes to convince me that I need to correct that omission. Similarly, the topics that draw me in are those in which I have some interest but have not investigated much. Far more than anyone could read is published, so the convention becomes a way of sampling what one is missing.

From my feelings of relief when someone is not impressive, I realize that I am mostly hunting for justification for my failure to read various work my conscience tells me I should. And I am always glad to find that some school of critics—the Freudians or the Marxists or the phenomenologists—are still asking the same questions and giving the same answers as when I last checked in on them, a year ago or three years ago. I can safely ignore them for a while longer.

Maybe I am not representative, but I cannot believe that. Certainly my ambitions, my interests, and my sensitivity to shifts in the wind mirror those of my MLA friends when we exchange notes at the evenings' cocktail parties. We go from session to session like drunks in search of that fabled drink that will quench all thirst. We are searching for a theme and

searching in vain. One problem is that we don't know if our thirst is intellectual or professional. Are we searching for the truth, for that method or system that will allow us to take texts—and, tomorrow, the world—firmly in hand? Or are we just seeking out that niche that will give us a defined and recognizable stall within the professional stable? After all, even lacking a theme, we all continue to do our professional work, teaching those classes, writing those essays. We window shop, with the notion that maybe it's about time that we choose which window to display ourselves in, and, like most people without faith, we alternately envy and ridicule the easy life faith seems to afford. We would also like the window we choose—if choose we eventually must—to be the one that consistently attracts the largest crowds, while also being a place where we can stand without shame and with conviction.

This last desire has become institutionalized in the profession's current tender concern for political correctness. Forget post-structuralism, deconstruction, neo-Marxism, and reader response theory. The message of the 1986 convention was that you can do any one of these or a thousand other things and the activity alone will not determine if you are in or out. The only demand currently is that you self-consciously locate your critical practice within the political/cultural context and that you demonstrate how your political stance is holier than anyone else's. In this regard, feminism provides the paradigm for current literary studies in the way that Derrida did five years ago, Levi-Strauss ten years ago, Northrop Frye twenty years ago, and New Criticism thirty years ago. Every paradigm dictates what can and cannot be said. What characterizes the movement from New Criticism and Frye to Derrida and feminism is a shift from a ban on talking about matters extrinsic to the text to a contempt for intrinsic matters as trivial and uninteresting. The location of the art work within the larger framework of cultural discourse (or "practices" if you follow Foucault instead of Derrida) dominates critical talk today.

But—and I guess this development is inevitable once these cultural issues are raised—critics are not content to merely talk about these things. (Or, to put it better, they highly resent the suggestion that their talk is mere talk.) To examine literature in relation to cultural discourse is to consider the tension between literature's way of talking and the culture's way of talking. Invariably, literary critics value the times when and places where literature talks differently. Which is not to say that literature's difference from the general culture is secure. Much recent criticism reveals with great subtlety, using the hermeneutics of suspicion, various texts' implication

in the general (or "dominant") culture, even texts that make seemingly radical gestures. But such criticism always works from the implicit viewpoint that union with prevailing cultural norms is to be avoided. What we are willing to champion and celebrate in texts focuses on the ways we believe they authentically challenge cultural orthodoxies; we look to literature and to criticism to offer new perspectives and new vocabularies within an all-too-familiar cultural scene.

This valorization of novelty is, itself, nothing new. But now we justify our praise of novelty for political reasons, not aesthetic (novelty's pleasure), perceptual (theories of "defamiliarization" or of attention), or epistemological (poetic insights poised against logical or scientific truths) ones. Our outlook assumes the dominant cultural discourse is oppressive and that the development of new idioms is liberating. The critic acts as the political correctness police person, indicating where a text reproduces the prevailing cultural norms of thought, organization, language, and power, while every once and a while bestowing a smile on texts that disrupt such norms. Other critical positions are subjected to the same test. The primary defense of any critical theory today takes place on the grounds of its political consequences, not in terms of its logical consistency, its faithfulness to the text, or to its reproduction of a certain audience's experience of the text.

I must pause here momentarily to mention that it is indicative of the current situation that to describe that situation in the way I am doing is to be labeled a conservative. Yet I feel myself a full participant in the current obsessions. I am not advocating a return to earlier justifications for criticism, only trying to describe our current biases toward a particular set of justifications, to the exclusion of other possible sets. My sensitivity to the apparent conservatism of my own position clearly marks the extent to which I also wish to be politically correct. I am sympathetic to the claim that ordinary language embodies social and political arrangements that are repressive and that we value literature and criticism to the extent that it imagines alternatives. What I wish to distance myself from, however, is the way in which current criticism has itself developed into a repetitive orthodoxy; surely I am not alone in experiencing its implicit censorship of certain positions that violate its fundamental axioms. But my desire to distance myself makes me yet another instance of a critic who tries to become holier than the rest by occupying the position of most radical difference, while the charge of conservatism would stem from the insistence that my attempted differences only smuggle back in the despi-

cable cultural contents that the radical critics want to escape. I cannot resolve this issue, but can only note that I am fully implicated (emotionally as well as by virtue of my argument) in this continual effort to occupy the political high ground. I am, to repeat, anatomizing my own disease.

Current criticism's political content can only be assured if we believe in a "talking cure." The primary axiom of the whole edifice must be that the way we talk makes a difference—and that the more different the talk, the bigger the difference. As someone rather attracted both to vulgar Marxism and to populism, the idealism (strictly speaking) and elitism of this position bothers me, especially since so many of its adherents apparently believe that they are Marxists. (I am not playing St. Karl games here, just asking for truth in labeling.) To put the point vulgarly, the history of twentieth-century Western capitalism attests to its thus far unthreatened capacity to endure all and any kinds of deviant talk without its essential economic and political structures being in the least altered. Furthermore, to bring in the populist element, highly deviant talk (as in modernist poetry and various experimental novels) has proved itself of interest only to very small audiences of specialists. At the very least, I think the neo-Marxists need to formulate some theory of how deviant talk works its political miracles if we are to accept their attachment to it. Marx's materialism and his reliance on the numerical superiority of the proletariat are intuitively convincing (at least to me); I am fully ready to admit that our century has proved such intuitions completely unfounded. But idealist and elitist positions have not even begun to address the fact that they need a theory of change. The most profound representatives of this position, Adorno and Marcuse, gave us pessimistic theories of capitalism's all-but-invincible power in lieu of some model of change.

I phrased this objection rather differently when I asked a friend over breakfast in the Marriott's coffee shop why anyone who truly wanted to promote a feminist or Marxist revolution would ever make the decision to become an English professor. Surely there are more direct avenues to such an end. I suspect that most of us got into the literature business first and acquired our political commitments later; now we were rather sloppily trying to make the two fit.

My friend replied that we all had modernist adolescences; modernism habitually portrayed itself as revolutionary and liberating, and to some extent it was those things. After all, he and I had read Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, and Conrad as teen-agers and had used them, like we used rock music, to escape the suburbs in which we grew up. Only now, with postmodernism's

assault on such modernist certainties, did the gap between art and radical politics yawn so wide, and the current theatrics were a response to the horrible suspicion that art was as completely co-opted as everything else. Besides, he added, look around. What other alternatives are there for the political radical; where else can you imagine a tolerable life for yourself? We may have—we certainly seem to have—uneasy consciences about our political correctness, but what other sphere offers a better opportunity for integrity? I had to admit that he had described my bind perfectly—and with a kindness that put my impatient hostilities to shame.

The convention highlights one further blindness inherent in current critical practices. Speaker after speaker stages his or her call for distancing ourselves from the dominant culture within a setting that calls attention to the persistent desire to belong. (I know that my years on the outside looking in have made me hypersensitive to needs for recognition and membership, but surely the convention exists precisely for people to whom such needs are central.) I am not claiming that we are hypocrites, just the contrary. If we are guilty of any sin, it is an overly non-ironic earnestness. Our lack of irony blinds us to the gap between our talk and the influence it might have on the world, and our lack of irony makes us inattentive to the unconscious needs communicated by our talk. For students of the word and its duplicities, we are remarkably deaf to the resonances of our own conversations among ourselves. These manifestos of high liberationist discourse, based on a celebration of difference, are presented in a forum where our audience listens in hopes of keeping up with the latest developments, and where extra-literary discussion is all about who gets what job and joins this department or that university. We may experience this urge for success, recognition, and membership within a professional elite as oppressive insofar as it deforms our personal lives, governs our waking and sleeping thoughts, and dictates how we spend most of our time, even our supposed leisure time. But we testify to that urge by attending the convention, and to deny the power of our aspirations to positions of cultural prestige and influence is to alienate ourselves from a vitally important constituent element of the arts we study, the profession to which we belong, and the audiences of students to whom we present works of arts and our beliefs about them.

A dialectic of identity and difference comes much closer to describing the arts and their relation to culture than some model of absolute negation. Which is not just to say that any work necessarily contains some elements of the culture that it struggles against, but also to say that every

work contains the desire to be a recognized and even celebrated part of the culture even as it struggles to differentiate itself from some aspects of the culture. (An added complication, of course, stems from the culture's valuation, since the romantic period, of difference, so that you gain acclaim and membership by being distinctive.) Such a dialectic more richly describes our own practice as critics also. And, I would insist, only within this dialectic does it make any sense at all to believe in talk's effectiveness. The irony of simultaneous urges for separation and belonging might seem a formula for impotence, but in fact provides the necessary elements of engagement, commitment, connection, and evaluation that a purified, absolute separation can never provide.

Let me repeat that we are not hypocrites. But we are also not entitled to beliefs in our own purity, and I do not think we are well served by dreams of purity. We do not have unmixed motives. Our allegiances are both to intrinsic and extrinsic values. We believe and delight in the intricacies of our work; we could not do it so well and so abundantly otherwise. We also cherish and desire the external rewards offered for good work: recognition, salary raises, better jobs. This second fact often embarrasses us and, like the Marriott, we often display that shame at the points where we connect to the wider world. Meanwhile, overcompensating perhaps, we take the high road in talk among ourselves, preaching a critical practice exemplary in its purity. Such preaching has become more vociferous as the external temptations become stronger. (We all know that the job market for "big names' and "rising stars" has heated up, with sweet deals offered that begin to resemble—on our own small scale—free agency in baseball.) Our sense of ourselves—and our critical practices—could benefit from a more flexible sense of and overt acknowledgement of our mixed motives.

OUR IDENTITY

I entered the room a little late for the session on criticism and social change. The first speaker, a woman, was already telling the audience of about sixty that "structuration" was the sociologists' term for what she wanted to describe, but that she would avoid using such hideous jargon. She was here to talk about her experiences working for change as a woman within the profession. Examples of prejudice were multiple: a department decides to hire a Renaissance scholar instead of someone in

women's studies; two new assistant professors are hired, the man with degree in hand, the woman ABD, so that he has a head start toward tenure; a woman is given onerous committee assignments, thus hurting her chances to publish. The speaker began to explain university bureaucracies and methods of negotiating with them in the vocabulary supplied by personnel management theories and organizational psychology. Her examples of prejudice had made me uneasy; now her valorization of the stuff MBAs are made on and her use of their horrendous neologisms positively offended me.

Academic audiences are hardly demonstrative. I was feeling puzzled, wondering if I was showing my curmudgeonly colors by finding her so distasteful. She was perfectly politically correct, a warrior for women's rights, and there was every reason to believe that an audience gathered to hear her, a well-known critic of criticism and a prominent neo-Marxist, talk about criticism's ability to effect social change would be sympathetic to her goals and achievements. In any case, I sensed something was wrong, but thought it might just be me.

The speaker obviously felt totally in control as she rounded the final corner and gave personal testimony about her career in "implementing change." A veteran of the sixties and of the New Left, she had refused to be discouraged by the movement's collapse, going off instead to take a workshop that taught her how to become a "change agent." At the first university where she was employed, she had put together a coalition of women who presented the administration with one hundred demands, some of them substantial, some of them fluff that was meant to be bargained away in negotiations. They got the administration to accede to all the demands they had agreed among themselves were essential. Subsequently, she had acted as a liaison between women scholars and various publishers as part of a concerted effort to overcome the long-standing tendency of women academics to publish less than their male counterparts. In conclusion, as someone "who had implemented much change in universities," she could tell us that change is possible if you work for it.

She thanked us and sat down. In silence. The moderator of the panel stood up and introduced the second speaker.

My first thought was, so much for our commitment to political change. Here is an audience that fondly believes itself radical, but when presented with an energetic and effective political activist, turns up its nose. The speaker might very well have interpreted our failure to applaud as further proof that aggressive women offend in this society. If so, she misread

her audience. Our response was more fundamental, less a matter of prejudice against her activities or her manner, than a complete failure to recognize her relationship to what we do and believe. Some class snobbery was present. She was dressed and talked like an in-house corporate lawyer—someone with a law degree from Notre Dame or a state university; but she was on our side. More crucial was our intellectual snobbery. Her analysis of the issues was crude and simple-minded. Worse, perhaps, was her straightforward pursuit of economic goods within the world we inhabit; academic radicals prefer their politics more refined: abstract visions of justice for all in some utterly transformed social order. Her attachment to the pseudo-academic disciplines developed for bureaucrats by the nation's business schools violated our allegiance to our more humane, subtle, complex, and elegant literary vocabulary. Finally, the tin ear that allowed her to use the word "change" in such inappropriate ways and a phrase like "change agent" without the slightest tinge of irony proclaimed that she was not one of us.

I am not defending our failure to applaud. I have never witnessed or even heard of a similar occurrence at an academic conference. It was certainly not premeditated and had all the feel of a cowardly group action; no one started the applause and thus it never began. Then, as the second speaker started in, we realized what had happened. We applauded the second speaker rather timidly, retrospectively embarrassed, and perhaps awed, by our discourtesy to the first speaker.

I do believe, however, that our impoliteness did dramatically reveal what we English and modern language professors, despite our various internecine quarrels, share in common. For better or for worse, this is who we are: a group that values complex political analyses over crude, if effective, political action. We are skeptics who find it difficult to credit direct accusations of sexual discrimination, even while developing theoretical models that designate a whole culture and all its linguistic usages "patriarchal"; habitual pessimists who have become so comfortable with our ritual denunciations of contemporary culture and all its works that any intimations of possible change offends us; political activists who fully intend to leave the dirty political work to others; and, most crucially, writers and teachers whose most firm allegiance is to language. You can say anything at the MLA convention and receive applause so long as you do not abuse our highly developed sense of linguistic decorum. To know, practice, and defend the intricate, unwritten, rules of that decorum makes you a full-fledged member of our group.

OVERSTIMULATION

My nephew, two weeks before his fourth birthday, announced to his parents that he wanted a party on the momentous occasion. His parents tried to head him off, but to no avail. They knew all too well what would happen. Matthew would spend two days in overwrought suspense, run around manically for the first hour or so of the party, and then throw some kind of tantrum, which might last anywhere from two hours to three days. His circuits get overloaded and he blows a fuse.

I cannot help but compare myself to Matthew when I'm at the MLA. I talk non-stop, hurriedly and mostly incoherently, from dawn until the early hours of the morning. I leave parties at one-thirty in the morning, knowing that I am exhausted, only to lie awake in bed until seven replaying all the day's conversations in my head. I am overwhelmed with anxiety about my career and my work. I feel alternately incredibly energized—ready to work at a pace previously unknown to me and with a new found strength and clarity—and utterly paralyzed, overwhelmed by how much good work is being done and the futility of thinking that any particular work could make a difference or find its way to attention and acclaim.

Does the tantrum come? In some form or another. Some one thing slips out of control in the frenzied rush, and the self's hold on the world feels threatened. One year the brief case with all my money and my hotel reservation got left in a cab. This year I was stuck with nine other people in an elevator made for seven; we spent a relatively calm hour—starting a little after midnight—together, but it was a supreme effort. More usually, I can displace the shakes onto travel anxiety. There is nothing worse than the plane ride home from the MLA convention. Unless it is sitting at my desk the next free morning and realizing that normalcy has returned; I can't remember all those things that seemed so clear to me four days ago; I have the same talents, the same work capacities, and the same stubborn slow mind that I had before immersing myself in the profession's cyclotron.

RESOLVE

The convention ends just in time for new year's resolutions. I make the contradictory promises to myself that I will publish more essays this year, in more prestigious journals, and that I will start extricating myself from

the obsessional and endless preoccupation with my career. Surely some kind of separate peace is possible, some more sane relation to my work, some way to accomplish it at a pace that does not banish pleasure (in the work itself or in outside activities) nor remain tyrannically dictated by anxiety I resolve not to attend the 1987 convention as a symbol of my embracing sanity. I do not believe myself for a moment.

I also decide to write more honestly. I think I know what I mean by saying this. Over the past eight years I have published a number of essays and a book, and I have carefully kept most people I know personally from reading any of it. I have worked in deep isolation, writing my pieces, sending them off to editors I don't know and who don't know me, and seeing them appear in various journals, never read by anyone. Their primary existence is as lines on my vita. Such anonymity should promote freedom, but in fact does just the opposite. I have pursued the aesthetic course, adopting any line of argument that helped to shape a coherent, elegant, publishable essay since I was never held accountable for what I said, never made to defend as my own convictions the positions that I took. Like all disciplines, literary criticism has any number of ready-made arguments lying about and I used the tools at hand as the need arose. My teaching felt much different; in the classroom I faced a challenging (in the best classes) audience and felt called upon to stage myself as an engaged respondent to literary works and various cultural and political facts. But in my essays I only needed to stage arguments, and the rules for such staging were relatively clear and could be routinely mimicked.

My professional contribution to this convention was a paper on Matthew Arnold delivered the very first night to a small audience of thirty people, twenty of whom were various friends of mine. When I agreed to give the paper last spring, I had planned a fairly straightforward Foucauldian reading of Arnold's poetry. Working on the paper this summer, I discovered that such readings were rampant; Arnold's poetry, lots of people had noticed, is tailor-made for discussing issues of power, discipline, and socialization. After reading three or four such accounts, I began to react against what seemed to me the unexamined and really implausible model of power that informed these critics' work, and I ended up writing a paper that attacked certain Foucaultian orthodoxies by way of proposing that Arnold's various essays on education offered a better schema for understanding the individual's relation to culture and to the state. I knew my paper was bad, not because Foucault is right, but because it is preposterous to attack Foucault by way of Arnold. I was groping toward

issues I did think were of some real importance, but, constrained by my announced topic (Matthew Arnold), settled for a defense of Arnold's thought that had the sole virtue of being novel. But I let myself off too easily if I merely blame the topic. I also knew exactly how MLA papers work. You speak your piece for twenty minutes or so to an audience that applauds at the conclusion and that's it. All sessions always run overtime, so there is never time for questions. And the paper is not even in print, the ultimate in non-accountability. True, I was concerned about the impression I would make on my fellow panelists, whom I respected. But I consoled myself with the thought that I only managed to listen intermittently to papers given in a session where I also had to speak and the same must be true for others.

What I had not counted on were so many friends being in the audience, most of whom had never actually read anything of mine. They took my paper seriously and wanted to discuss it with me when we all went out for drinks afterward. I found myself in the awkward position of trying to sort out for them—and for myself—what things in the paper I believed and which were there only to solve the logistical problem of having to talk about Matthew Arnold and say something new. I felt myself a hack, a whore.

And I found myself attuned, throughout the rest of the convention, to the distinction between the wares we sell, the lines we take, and our deeper convictions, anxieties, and desires. The cynic can easily say that all those deeper motives are ones of professional ambition, which is why the surface texts are so arbitrary. Plenty of evidence exists to support such a view. But there also exists a truly felt uneasiness that exhibits itself in a continual struggle to find adequate forms for our convictions about the subjects we love and discuss, about the issue of art's and our place in this culture. I resolved to join this struggle.

That edged silence after the "change agent's" talk had been more honest, truer to our beliefs, than most of the words I had heard spoken at the convention. Eloquent silences, however, can hardly serve our needs or satisfy our ambitions, not for us who live in language. We have prostituted ourselves to the exigencies of academic advancement and the perks of academic success, yes, and experience the resultant self-hatred and ironic distrust of appearances.

But the situation is more complex. We have also become the prisoners of forms not supple enough to express our relation to our work or that work's relation to the world. All this postmodernist anxiety—focused on

those thresholds where representative strains to reach the represented and art connects to that elusive cheat, life—cannot be reduced to some primal act of bad faith. Within their own terms, artists and critics are doing good, honorable work. But we have lost a way to bring such work to an audience in any way that does not belie the very aspirations that inform its creation. We stand, represented in the books we write and read, slightly askew, captured in words that refuse to ring quite true. We repeat endlessly to ourselves formulas and beliefs that we know anyone outside our discipline finds difficult to credit, and can never really rest quietly in the easy conviction that we simply are right and they are wrong. Our forms are inadequate because they cannot wrest assent from the general culture and our talk rings false because we cannot fully believe in ourselves when such assent is consistently withheld.

This, for us, is our greatest indignity, the cross the times make us bear. No doubt, it is a rarefied complaint to bewail that the age does not afford us forms or words which seem adequate to our purposes. No doubt, we should recognize how persistently we currently say "political" when we mean "linguistic." Without a doubt, we need to be more skeptical about the extent to which forging acceptable forms and linguistic usages for ourselves (the endless task of writers) entails political changes. First, before we can even consider the true relation of language, the material we work in, to the political, the arena we claim we wish to transform, we must acknowledge the primarily linguistic nature of our endeavors, as a modest initial step toward honesty.