

The Dark Side of “Postmodern Moonshine”

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Abstract In our summer 2006 issue, we ran a comprehensive overview of how postmodernism has degraded composition on our campuses. Steve Kogan enlarges that indictment and charges that the movement has deliberately corrupted every area of English instruction—from the acquisition of skills and knowledge to the more fundamental mission of developing in students the habits of disciplined learning.

Keywords Postmodernism · Learning · Teaching composition · Composition theory · Nihilism · Intellectual diversity · Thought police

In a letter to Hermann Schauenburg, [Jacob Burckhardt] feared that a “social last judgment” was coming; he warned of the “general barbarism” of the “social revolution” and denounced the “tyranny over the spirit carried out under the pretense that education is the secret ally of capitalism which must be destroyed.” Burckhardt, Letter of March 3, 1846, in Gottfried Dietze, introduction to Burckhardt’s *Reflections on History*

In 1929, Columbia College expanded its one-year Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West into a two-year program, and in 1941 the staff began to focus chiefly on primary source material, which came to include readings in European revolutionary literature from Robespierre to Lenin and, in my CC2 class,

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Bakunin and Gramsci as well. In 1968, the program was again reduced to a year, but without the sense of purpose and intellectual authority that animated its first ten years.¹

An old friend and college classmate recently walked through the campus and sent me a postcard with the following parenthetical note: “Looked at ‘CC’ readings in bookstore—what a joke.” A joke indeed. Somewhere along the way, the formidable chapters of Columbia’s own two books on Western history, which complemented the two thousand pages of source material,² had been replaced by chapters in *The Cambridge History of the World* that students were merely “encouraged” to read. As for primary source materials, documents in revolutionary and socialist thought alone were reduced to the point where letters, trial records, and excerpts of major figures such as Robespierre, the Decembrists, the Chartist, Owen, Mazzini, Prudhon, and Lenin himself were no longer required. Also gone were Fourier’s concept of the Phalanstery, Bolshevik decrees of 1917–1918, Stalin on the Soviet Constitution (and the constitution itself), Mussolini on fascism and the corporate state, and Hitler’s address to the German working class in 1940, all of which had been included in the 1946 edition of the CC2 reader.

That was the kind of exposure to radical ideologies that Columbia offered during the alleged height of “Cold War repression” in America, before the advent of postmodern theory and the politics of the New Left in higher education. If I had not been required to take the course, and if I had not pursued my studies in radicalism and its critics in subsequent years, my ear for language would still have been repelled by “postmodern moonshine,”³ but I would have been ill equipped to appreciate the force of its destructive arguments or understand the allure of academic theorists who present themselves as the professional “unmaskers” of Western culture.

Even with my background, however, my first encounters with postmodern prose left me in the dark. When a former teacher in my department called me up in the late 1980s, read me a passage of Theory, and asked me if I knew “what the hell” it meant, I tried to make sense of it as best I could, but wasn’t satisfied with my attempts. During the 1970s I was hearing reports about a hot subject in graduate English studies, but I had no idea that something radically new was afoot, and I took them as signs of just another academic trend that had nothing to do with my concerns. I was learning to teach composition to minimally prepared college students, writing a dissertation on the 17th-century English court masque, and

¹ Contrast the history of the course in its first ten years (1919–1929) with its problems in the 1970s and beyond, in Timothy P. Cross, *An Oasis of Order: The Core Curriculum at Columbia College* (Office of the Dean, 1995), chapters 3 and 7.

² The following lines reflect the high level of discourse in the two-year history supplements for the course: “Dictatorship . . . severs the state from the community, and never more so than when it proclaims the two to be one.... The order it sets up is not harnessed to the communal frame of order. It arrogates to itself complete independence from that frame. It has no abiding rules, no fundamental laws. Its own law is always that of the hour;” from *The Web of Government* (1947), by Robert M. MacIver, in *Chapters in Western Civilization*, Vol. 2, ed. Contemporary Civilization Staff of Columbia College, Columbia University (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), “Totalitarian Life and Politics,” Section I, 425–26.

³ Nan Miller, “Postmodern Moonshine in English 101,” *Academic Questions*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Summer 2006).

having problems with both. Had I known more about the new philosophy and the nature of its prose (which Heather Mac Donald aptly referred to years later as “Theorese”⁴), I would have run the other way, but I was immediately interested when a colleague described the lessons of Peter Elbow and Caleb Gattegno on writing instruction, and after I took several workshops in their methods from teachers I respected, I quickly experienced their practical value for my students and myself.

A year or two after I received that frustrated call, a close friend came to live with me for one semester. He was teaching in what was termed an “alternative” high school in Brooklyn, knew something about the new pedagogy, and suggested that we give ourselves an education in postmodern studies, even though they had nothing to do with the problems of his work with at-risk students, or with mine as a community college English teacher in the CUNY system. Ted had been a history and philosophy major at UCLA when I was studying at Columbia, and he had belonged for a time to a Marxist study group led by a professor who lived in a house on the beach in Malibu (some things truly never change). Now he was completing a dissertation at St. John’s on representations of the American Indian in 19th-century textbooks and Congressional debates. The more he read, the more disturbed he became by the discrepancies between his findings and PC assumptions about American history in his field (even the supposedly new and proper term “Native American” appears in one of the most popular of those early textbooks as “the original American”).

Ted had witnessed the birth of radical campus politics when he went to Berkeley in the 1960s, and I learned a good deal from him and from what I was beginning to find out for myself. We were perfect partners for our enterprise and read everything from *Black Athena* and *Of Grammatology* to the New York State Department of Education’s requirements for multicultural high school teaching in history and literature. From time to time, we cleared our minds of rubbish by reading chapters from Chateaubriand’s *Memoirs* on his childhood and the French Revolution, and we reread Nietzsche and Spengler on the nature of nihilism in the modern world. After a month or two of readings and discussion, we began to see a network of connections between postmodern theory and the ascendancy of the left in education, and it was at that point that we began to understand the process of dissolution that was now rapidly occurring in the humanities.

It is in light of this brief autobiographical sketch that I applaud Nan Miller for her work on behalf of sound composition instruction (*Academic Questions*, vol. 19, no. 3), but it is also in light of this sketch that I see a limitation in her essay, whose significance bears directly on the struggle to free education from the combined grip of theory and the academic left. More troubling yet, this stranglehold is in effect as jihadist hatred of the West is being amplified by the anti-American and anti-Western world view of the left; and I cannot help but observe that Miller does not seem to appreciate, at least not in this piece, that she is up against an intellectual obsession that is Marxist in spirit and in certain instances Marxist through-and-

⁴ Heather MacDonald, “Theorese,” *Academic Questions* (Summer 1993).

through.⁵ Ted and I came to this conclusion about postmodern theory after we home-schooled ourselves in the *idée fixe* of the “liberated” classroom, and, in the following years, I recorded my evidence of a radical assault on every legitimate standard in writing and literary scholarship.⁶

One would think that educators would take a special pride in the hard-won knowledge and achievements of their discipline, but the exact opposite has happened through their almost hypnotic embrace of “anti-foundational critique,”⁷ which has exerted a profoundly negative yet seductive influence across a wide range of studies. This unhealthy combination of negativity and enticement is, in fact, one of the most pernicious characteristics of “Theorese,” for it bears the mark of a psychological addiction to the allure of destructive ideas and fantasies. Nietzsche’s term for this condition of the spirit was “decadence,” by which he meant a weakening of “the valuating instinct” to the point where “The entire West has lost those instincts out of which institutions grow, out of which the future grows.”⁸ It was this descent into nihilism that Spengler had in mind when he wrote in *The Hour of Decision* (1933) that Western society “is sick, sick in its instincts and therefore in its mind. It offers no defense. It takes pleasure in its own vilification and disintegration.”⁹

The closer I looked into the ever-morphing schools of the postmodern movement, the more these grim assessments kept echoing in my mind, and I began to appreciate the degree to which our time-tested principles of language, thought, and objective evidence had been undermined by succeeding waves of radical critique. When

⁵ One has to be careful not to exaggerate superficial differences between Marxism and postmodern theory. In “The University as Agent of Social Transformation: The Postmodern Argument Considered,” *Academic Questions* (Summer 1993), Jerry L. Martin remarks that postmodernism “retains strands of Marxism” but debunks the very concept of objectivity and “the pursuit of disinterested truth,” whereas “traditional Marxists were always realists” and thought that “factories and workers and owners ... were real, that children really worked fourteen-hour days and miners really died of black-lung disease,” 58. Marx and his followers were hardly pursuing “disinterested truth,” however, no matter how much they spoke of factories, workers, and owners. One has only to read Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (c.1850) to appreciate the fact that there are no real people in the writings of Marx, only generic “oppressors” and “proletarians,” an obsessive hatred for the existing order of things, and a drive for radical change. By contrast, every page of Mayhew’s work is filled with vibrancy and life and a genuine regard for actual people in all the particularity of their speech, behavior, trades, psychology, and terms of survival. Despite their authors’ Marxist politics, the best examples of leftwing historiography, such as Christopher Hill’s *Milton and the English Revolution* and E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, stand closer to the tradition of Mayhew than to Marx.

⁶ In “An ABC of Modern English Studies: The Death of Criticism,” *Heterodoxy* (May–June 1993), “Discourse Production: Composition Studies in the Grip of Literary Theory,” *Academic Questions* (Spring 1994), “In Celebration of George Orwell,” *Academic Questions*, (Winter 1996–97), and “Herman Melville and his Marxist Critics,” *Praesidium* (Summer 2006). I have drawn on some of my findings in support of my present argument.

⁷ For a detailed list of “antifoundationalist” writers on philosophy, science, history, and legal, literary, and composition theory, see Ruth E. Ray, *The Practice of Theory: Teacher Research in Composition* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993), 11. According to Ray, the term was coined by Stanley Fish.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Crisis of Modernity,” in *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), Section 39, 93–94.

⁹ Oswald Spengler, *The Hour of Decision*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1934), 118.

Catherine Lamb promotes “maternal thinking”¹⁰ in the composition classroom, William Covino urges teachers to question the pedagogy of “writing with a purpose,”¹¹ and Michael Rogin asserts that Captain Ahab’s lunatic quest “reached the derangement at the heart of America,”¹² we are confronted with the consequences of certain assumptions about writing and reality that are not simply misguided but destructive on every level of instruction, from the teaching of skills and empirical knowledge to its deeper aim of inculcating habits of disciplined attention, which Simone Weil rightly calls the true aim of education.¹³

To describe the peddlers of “postmodern moonshine” merely as “theorists,” therefore, is to surrender the field in advance to their semantic hold on the debate. In “Postmodern Moonshine in English 101,” for example, Miller refers to Paulo Freire as “another prominent theorist,”¹⁴ and cites the Freirean line that has been repeated by the composition establishment for the last thirty years: “Traditional discourse confirms the dominant mass culture and the inherited, official shape of knowledge.”¹⁵ To appreciate the doctrinal power of this belief among Freire’s legions of academic followers, one needs to know that it derives its force from the dogmatic generalization at its core: “The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas,”¹⁶ which Karl Marx proclaimed in *The German Ideology* (1845–1846) and repeated soon after in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).¹⁷

There should be no surprises here, for the ideals of *The Communist Manifesto* are predicated on a nihilistic drive to destroy “all existing social conditions.”¹⁸ What Spengler in *The Hour of Decision* refers to as “the conserving forces of the old

¹⁰ Catherine E. Lamb, “Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition,” *College Composition and Communication* (February 1991), 16.

¹¹ William Covino, “Making Differences in the Composition Class: A Philosophy of Invention” (1981), in Sharon Crowley, *A Teacher’s Introduction to Deconstruction* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English 1999) 16

¹² Michael Rogin, *Subversive Genealogies: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 119.

¹³ “All tasks that really call upon the power of attention are interesting for the same reason and to an almost equal degree. . . . If we have no aptitude or natural taste for geometry, this does not mean that our faculty for attention will not be developed by wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem. On the contrary it is almost an advantage.” Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Uses of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), 106. In these brief lines, Weil provides the strongest pedagogical argument I know against “relevant” subject matter and “individualized” instruction.

¹⁴ Miller, 25.

¹⁵ Miller, 25. Her citation is taken from Jane Danielewicz, *Teaching Selves: Identity, Pedagogy, and Teacher Education* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in Patrick Gardiner, *Theories of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 129. According to Lewis S. Feuer, it was a collaborative effort by Marx and Frederick Engels “in their mid-twenties,” as was *The Communist Manifesto*, in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics & Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), 246.

¹⁷ “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class,” Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in Feuer, 26.

¹⁸ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 41.

Culture,”¹⁹ Marx denounces with particular venom as “bourgeois property,” “bourgeois notions of freedom, culture, law, etc.,” and “The bourgeois claptrap about the family and education.”²⁰

All the schools of “anti-foundationalism” have made their way into the English curriculum and are expressions of Marxism in postmodern terms.²¹ All are hostile to what Marx dismisses as so-called “eternal truths,”²² and all are inspired by visions of radical social transformation, whether it be through a process of “subverting” the “patriarchal family,” deconstructing the “monological” classroom, or “problematizing” and even “theorizing” history, literature, language, law, and science.

Ever since the 1980s, the sheer weight of postmodern critique has come down hard on English 101, where composition theorists, oblivious to their contradictory claims (and urging their chaotic program on everyone else), insist that their classrooms will be “open” and “pluralistic” and at the same time “will encourage students to write in a way that interacts critically with the ideological formations of their world and take action to change them.”²³ Composition theorists are indeed talking about “altering student thinking,” as Miller observes, and there is good reason to imagine that their students will come away with the notion “that writing is the joint effort of budding activists,” yet there is a deeper purpose at work in “the social-theoretic model for freshman composition,”²⁴ which is to radicalize students to the point where their entire world view will be transformed. The family, the nation, race, class, and gender—all this and more is grist for the mill of the postmodern classroom and comes under the heading of a curriculum that “will encourage students to write in a way that interacts critically with the ideological formations of their world and take action to change it.”

Beneath the long-windedness of the prose there is a direct intent to suppress intellectual diversity and transform consciousness, and, as in the case of Freire’s dictum about “the inherited, official shape of knowledge,” the goal of the “social-theoretic model” bears the stamp of its Marxist origins: The philosophers have only

¹⁹ Spengler, *The Hour of Decision*, 118.

²⁰ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 23ff.

²¹ Even the rarified abstractions of deconstructionist theory aim at radical change. In “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Jacques Derrida announces that his critique of language embraces the very origins of “Western Science and Philosophy” and that he is fascinated by Levi Strauss’s “critical search for a new status of discourse” through the “abandonment of all reference to a center, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute *archia* [beginning],” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (London and New York: Longman Group UK Ltd., 1988), 108, 115–116. The value of new historicism to postmodern theory lay in bridging the gap between “materialist” critiques of society and deconstruction, which proved to be as malleable in the hands of Stephen Greenblatt as it was for feminist, post-colonial, and other self-styled subverters of their academic disciplines.

²² In reply to the accusation that “communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality” and “therefore acts in contradiction to all past history,” Marx and Engels claim that the “eternal truths” of religion and morality are merely ideological props for the age-old “exploitation of one part of society by the other” and will only vanish “with the total disappearance of class antagonisms,” in *The Communist Manifesto*, 27. Postmodern theorists have enlarged the scope of this attack to include any traditional norm that falls within their own particular bias as a “social construction.”

²³ Michael Carter, *Where Writing Begins: A Postmodern Deconstruction* (2003), in Miller, 24.

²⁴ Miller, 24–25.

interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."²⁵ Every postmodern vision of academic–social transformation harbors the goal, in Marxist rhetoric, of demystifying bourgeois false consciousness, i.e., of interacting “critically with the ideological formations” of our world. Hence the abiding influence in the postmodern classroom of the language of deconstruction, whose elasticity has replicated itself in academic movements that continue to dehegemonize, decanonize, and dephallicize the supposedly repressive mental constructs of the West.

We deny the depth and intensity of the crisis in the academy at our peril, for the attacks against proven standards in composition teaching and literary studies are part of a larger campaign of demolition that is being waged by the left. In this regard, Miller makes a telling observation that nevertheless betrays a strategic weakness of understanding: “In a bizarre postmodern twist, the devaluing of literature now comes from within the English department itself.”²⁶ Indeed it does, and the situation certainly is perverse, but there is nothing “bizarre” about the mechanics of intellectual subversion, and nothing has been hidden from our eyes about the goals of the academic left, which has openly declared its antipathy to the great works of Western literature, standards of good writing in composition instruction, and what Danny J. Anderson contemptuously refers to as “the illusion of masterable knowledge and meaning.”²⁷ In Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907), Mr. Vladimir sums up the nihilist’s impulse to destroy knowledge itself when he says to Mr. Verloc that “it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics.”²⁸ Postmodernists have been throwing bombs of Marxized theory into academic disciplines for years. In the matter of composition teaching alone, Miller notes that “correctness [in writing]...still matters a great deal to a discerning employer,”²⁹ yet she fails to see that, in the eyes of the composition establishment, “discerning” employers belong precisely to the hated enemy class, namely, those “who are white, male,” and “propertied,” help to promote an “imperial literacy” through an “imperialistic education,” and need workers who are trained to “docilely accept rules handed down from above.”³⁰ In the words of *The Communist Manifesto*, bourgeois culture is “a mere training to act as a machine,”³¹ a piece of demagoguery that informs the communist will to power over education, which Marx characteristically frames as a humanitarian enterprise “to rescue education from the influence

²⁵ Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), in Feuer, 245. This is a classic instance of Marx’s disregard for “the pursuit of disinterested truth,” in which he dismisses in a single breath the long line of transformative ideas in philosophy, science, mathematics, religion, and technology that has marked the intellectual history of the West.

²⁶ Miller, 27.

²⁷ Danny J. Anderson, “Deconstruction: Critical Strategy / Strategic Criticism,” in *Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. G. Douglas Atkins & Laura Morrow (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 151. “Subversion” is a word of choice among theorists themselves: “Since schools are a mainstay of logocentrism, the adoption of deconstructive attitudes toward institutional pedagogies is necessarily a subversive act,” in Crowley, 53, n. 8.

²⁸ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1921), 40.

²⁹ Miller, 20.

³⁰ Linda Haas, “In Search of Dignity: Liberatory Literacy in the Two-Year College,” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* (December 1992), 260–61.

³¹ Danielewicz, in Miller, 25.

of the ruling class.”³² Nadezhda Mandelstam has written eloquently about the bitter consequences of that goal for Russian culture after the Bolshevik revolution. “The proliferation of restrictive codes of speech and behavior on American college campuses and the surrender of teachers and administrators to “postmodern moonshine” are steps along the way toward a real, as opposed to a theoretical intellectual slavery.

“It is no coincidence,” writes Miller, “that the rise of the ‘cultural studies movement in freshman composition’ has coincided exactly with a decline in literacy among college graduates.”³³ As she observes, English 101 has suffered under the baneful influence of “jargonitis” on student writing, the marketing of composition theory to uncritical grantors and administrators, and the intimidation of colleagues to the point where they are “reluctant to protest,” but the underlying problem is that postmodern theory is deliberately destructive and feeds on a negative impulse to subvert education for the sake of power. By their own pronouncements and practices, the proponents of Theory have defined themselves in opposition to the conserving forces of “the old Culture,” and even their utopian visions of the “liberated” classroom are conceived as a reaction against the old order and not as an independent creation that can take its place among other contributions to knowledge and perception.

Postmodernism is therefore not simply one point of view among others but a self-proclaimed method of subversion, and, in the ensuing wreckage, all that remains standing is itself.³⁴ Destruction on all fronts is precisely what the academic left has aimed to achieve, even against innovative teachers such as Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie, whose genuinely new and valuable approaches to writing instruction and student self-reliance were not merely mutated for careerist purposes, as Miller writes (“to cut a new edge and thereby extend the life-span of a chic new field”³⁵), but were targeted as a form of “colonial literacy”³⁶ (midway between “imperial” and “liberatory literacy”), which promotes an “expressionist rhetoric” through the capitalist belief in “the uniqueness of the individual”³⁷ and the patriarchal concept of “the autonomous self.”³⁸ Marx said all this in a single, hostile phrase when he attacked “bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom,”³⁹ which he demonized as the ideological principles of capitalist exploitation.

³² Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 25.

³³ Miller, 25.

³⁴ Mac Donald, 39–40, makes the following astute observation: “Where once a scholar of Jacobean drama and of the Barbizon landscape school commanded separate subjects and critical tools today they study and speak the identical poststructuralist goo of ‘discursive spaces,’ the ‘engendering of difference,’ the ‘contestation of phallogocentrism,’ and the ‘problematics of the gaze.’ The ascendancy of Theorese in an area of study is always accompanied by the eclipse of its traditional subject matter.”

³⁵ Miller, 10.

³⁶ Haas, 261

³⁷ James Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” *College English* (September 1988), 487.

³⁸ Andrea Lunsford, “Intellectual Property, Concepts of Selfhood, and the Teaching of Writing,” *Journal of Basic Writing* (Fall 1992), 65.

³⁹ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 22.

This same destructive mindset appears at the upper levels of English studies, where scholarly and aesthetic excellence have been similarly tarred. According to the new historicists, for example, both the New Criticism of the 1950s as well as traditional studies in American literature mystified readers into believing that great literature is timeless and that America's democratic values "are embodied in texts of aesthetic genius," beliefs that have been "ideologically self-serving to certain groups, especially to white male elites."⁴⁰ The same template has been used to "problematize" great European authors and other approaches to literature, for no matter who the author may be and no matter what school of criticism is under discussion, if they have stood the test of time and their richness and complexity have been brought to light, they are grist for the mill to be "theorized" into masks for privilege. Whether they are construed as instruments of "hegemonic," "foundational," or "patriarchal" discourse, all established forms of literary scholarship and criticism are accused of having trained students to believe that great literature derives either from the "mysterious genius of an artist" or "the mysterious perfection of a text"; hence the false mystique of the traditional literary classic as a "numinous literary authority"⁴¹ beyond the reach of time and historical contingency. Miller has it exactly right when she observes that "Composition courses would be greatly improved if literature were reinstated," but it would be good to know where she thinks that a significant body of tomorrow's instructors will come from "who hold art sacred, who love great works for their timelessness,"⁴² when today's English majors are trained in a dozen different ways to believe that these values are nothing more than "social constructs" born of "logocentric" thinking and are mired in "material practices"⁴³ that have been "ideologically self-serving to certain groups, especially to white male elites."

This is not academic instruction but academic propaganda, which surrounds every subject in the English curriculum, from grammar to great literature, in a haze of sinister meanings, tosses crude race, class, and gender epithets in every direction, and insults productive colleagues through the deliberate yet mindless use of pejoratives such as "colonial literacy" and "expressionist rhetoric." Even Derrida and his acolytes, who speak from the more rarified heights of Theory, have a list of supposedly false and oppressive mental constructions, to which they attach pseudo-philosophical labels such as "logocentrism," "privileged" references, "teleological" thinking, and "transcendental signifiers." Similar terms have lent a specious

⁴⁰ Cecelia Tichi, "American Literary Studies to the Civil War," in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 218.

⁴¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1988), 3. The facts are otherwise, for the traditional study of literature since the inception of German studies in philology has been preeminently historical through deep studies in ancient mythologies and national folklores, literary biography, the social and political contexts of literature, and the history of texts themselves. Greenblatt also fails or refuses to understand that a great work is both of its time and of perennial interest, "News that stays news," as Ezra Pound writes in his *ABC of Reading*.

⁴² Miller, 30.

⁴³ H. Aram Veesser, Introduction to *The New Historicists*, ed. Veesser (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), xi. The reduction of literature to "materialist practices" is grounded in Marx's "materialist philosophy of history."

intellectual authority to feminist attacks against “phallogocentrism” and even “phallogocentrism,” and variations of these labels also show up in the multiculturalists’ *bête noir* of “Eurocentrism” and in new historicist critiques of “transcendent,” i.e., repressive literary values. This whole repertoire of fantastical language is all the more destructive because its appeal is not to our questioning faculties, our reason, or store of empirical knowledge but to feelings of anger, guilt, suspicion, and resentment, and it correspondingly feeds a craving to live in a mental world of abstractions and endless negativity, coupled with fantasies of “liberation” from intellectual constraints. It has been used to disparage what new historicists call the “monological and myopic historiography”⁴⁴ of traditional literary studies, and although it cannot withstand the scrutiny of psychologically healthy and informed skeptical minds, it continues to function through a ready-made set of assumptions that can be swallowed whole, even, or perhaps especially, at their most opaque.

As an academic vogue, deconstruction may have had its day, yet it is still doing its work. All the succeeding schools of the academic left have, in one way or another, been engaged in “problematizing our understanding,”⁴⁵ a project that can undermine, pervert, or otherwise stultify the traditional vocabulary of research, besmirched in Theorese as “the logocentric baggage of words such as *method*, *technique*, and *approach*.”⁴⁶

The traditional classroom is correspondingly smeared as a “master–slave relationship,” where the teacher, a supposed functionary of the ruling class, delivers the (monological) communication of truth“ to the student as victim, who is trapped in the role of the generic proletarian as ”an ignorant, enslaved, and completely different other.”⁴⁷

These false and at-bottom incendiary accusations illustrate what is perhaps the greatest reversal of reality in “postmodern moonshine,” which depicts both the acquisition of skills and the exposure to great minds as a form of Western thought control and the undermining of genuine learning as a “liberation.” Could any argument more perfectly support the undisciplined emotions of students who are unwilling to learn and suppress the energies of those who want an education? And, indeed, what is there to learn from teachers who believe that the transmission of basic knowledge and skills is a form of oppression? To frame the problem in these terms is to see both the Marxized language of the academic Left and Marx’s vision itself as symptoms of the nihilistic temperament. No one has put the problem more clearly than Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*: “That which makes institutions institutions is despised, hated, rejected: whenever the word ‘authority’ is so much as heard one believes oneself in danger of a new slavery.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Veese, xiii.

⁴⁵ One of the truly all-purpose abstractions in the postmodern lexicon. A google search reveals that anything can be “problematized,” i.e., “problematizing our understanding” of literature (Atkins and Morrow), “our understanding of the Enlightenment’s use of the term ‘enthusiasm’” (*Church History*), “our conception of curriculum,” “our understanding of history,” “our teaching,” “our knowledge,” “mathematics,” and “the term ‘psychotherapy.’”

⁴⁶ Atkins, 19.

⁴⁷ Atkins, 17, 18.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 94.

In the book of Theorese, every characterization of genuine standards of knowledge, thought, and institutional life is negative. “Hegemonic,” “logocentric,” “canonical,” “essentialist,” “privileged,” and “elitist”—the ultimate smear—these and a whole host of similar terms are summed up in what Nietzsche calls the hated word “authority.” There are inner-city students who speak of education as “white man’s tricknology,” and I do not think that I am exaggerating when I say that radicalized teachers and students who denigrate Western knowledge and culture any way they can have taken the first steps that lead to Lenin’s frame of mind when he wrote to Maxim Gorky that Russia’s educated classes were not the nation’s “brains but shit.”⁴⁹

All the “liberatory” theorists of the postmodern academy have worked like beavers to deconstruct reason, common sense, and what it means to be human and possess a self. Hence the disconnect between their pronouncements and the actual stuff of writing and literature⁵⁰ and indeed their aversion to these disciplines except as springboards to radical politics. Consider the following three statements from among the dozens I could cite: (1) “Overthrow syntax . . . [destroy] the logical grid of the reader-writer [and] drive him out of his mind,”⁵¹ (2) The classroom is a place in which “we are all colonized [through a] prevailing balance of terrors and powers,”⁵² and (3) “Marxist criticism is not just an alternative technique for interpreting “Paradise Lost” or *Middlemarch*. It is part of our liberation from oppression.”⁵³ Even the seemingly non-political school of deconstruction has become a vehicle for politicized research and, in Anderson’s words, has replaced “the illusion of masterable knowledge and meaning” with “the analysis of power and authority in meaning.”⁵⁴

The academic left has showered itself with praise over its supposedly “vibrant” advances in the field and claims that it has superseded the “traditional boundaries” of Marxist criticism with a “rather sophisticated mixture of critical approaches,”⁵⁵ yet they all tend in one direction, and the results have been uniformly corrupting on every level of scholarship. One could fill volumes with their deliberate distortions of literary documents, previous standards of research and interpretation, and the aims and practices of traditional pedagogy. And how could it be otherwise when writing itself is taught by instructors who “*instinctively prefer* that which leads to

⁴⁹ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Letter of September 15, 1919, in Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol 1, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 328.

⁵⁰ Nothing could be further from the abstractions of modern literary theory than Lionel Trilling’s observation that “In its essence literature is concerned with the self” and that its function, “through all its mutations, has been to make us aware of the particularity of selves,” in *Freud and the Crisis of our Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 58, 33.

⁵¹ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), in Robert de Beaugrande, “In Search of Feminist Discourse: The ‘Difficult’ Case of Luce Irigaray,” *College English* (March 1988), 272.

⁵² Kurt Spellmeyer, “‘Too Little Care’: Language, Politics, and Embodiment,” *College English* (March 1993), 272.

⁵³ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 76.

⁵⁴ Anderson, 151,

⁵⁵ Michael Ryan, “Political Criticism,” in Atkins & Morrow, 201.

dissolution”)?⁵⁶ Andrew Sledd claims that “there is no thing, literacy,”⁵⁷ Carolyn Erickson Hill argues for “the absolute necessity” in composition teaching to “enter into a conceptual turmoil” with the ‘feared other’,⁵⁸ and John Clifford notes that a number of celebrated feminist theorists aim to “disturb identities and systems, push back limits, and undo positions, rules, and order.”⁵⁹

In her analysis of why literature is not being taught in today’s English 101, Miller dissects Erika Lindermann’s spurious arguments about the inappropriateness and irrelevance of literature to composition instruction, indeed about reading at all in English 101.⁶⁰ She also notes that “theorists see Shakespeare and his ilk as carriers of oppressive Western values—racist, sexist, patriarchal, and imperialist,”⁶¹ but she misses the full depth of the attack, in which the very quality of the writing by “Shakespeare and his ilk” has been deconstructed, dehegemonized, and denigrated until their works no longer resemble themselves.

Joseph Harris, for example, notes that for Roland Barthes, one of the shining lights in the postmodern firmament, Balzac and Racine represent the worst sort of writing, “namely, “the closed work,” or “well-made text.”⁶² In postmodern theory, the “well-made text” can even be turned into a botch. Summarizing one of the major radical changes in modern Shakespeare studies, Gary Taylor observes that “Innumerable critics have admired the aesthetic wholeness of texts that are being described, now, as inept collages of radically incompatible material, scissored and pasted together.”⁶³ Indeed, any argument that tarnishes a major author will do. Edward Said claims that it is not only Conrad’s politics but also his “aesthetics [that] are, so to speak, imperialist.”⁶⁴ Melville’s rich allusive prose in *Moby Dick* is

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, 94. The full sentence reads: “The *décadence* in the valuating instinct of our politicians, our political parties goes so deep that *they instinctively prefer* that which leads to dissolution, that which hastens the end.” For Nietzsche, this process depends on self-deception. In *The Anti-Christ*, written immediately after *Twilight*, Nietzsche remarks that “this desiring *not* to see as one sees ... is virtually the primary condition for all who are in any sense *party*: the party man necessarily becomes a liar,” Section 55, 173. In light of postmodern theory, which claims Nietzsche as one of its own, it is noteworthy that he contrasts “The *décadence* in the valuating instinct” with the discipline of philology, his own area of expertise, which “is to be understood here in a very wide sense as the art of reading well—of being able to read off a fact *without* falsifying it by interpretation, *without* losing caution, patience, subtlety in the desire for understanding,” 169.

⁵⁷ Andrew Sledd, “Readin’ not Riotin’: The Politics of Literacy,” *College English* (September 1988), 499.

⁵⁸ Carolyn Eriksen Hill, *Writing from the Margins: Power and Pedagogy For Teachers of Composition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 149.

⁵⁹ John Clifford, commenting on Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, in “Discerning Theory and Politics,” *College English* (September 1989), 530–31.

⁶⁰ See Miller’s discussion of Lindermann’s “Three Views of Composition,” *College English* (March 1995) in “Fallacy 6: ‘Freshman composition: No Place for Literature,’” 27–29.

⁶¹ Miller, 28.

⁶² Joseph Harris “The Plural Text / The Plural Self Roland Barthes and William Coles,” *College English* February 1987), 164.

⁶³ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 357.

⁶⁴ Edward Said, “Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*,” in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 24.

depicted as a literary expression of industrial capitalism, since Melville supposedly treats his sources as “raw materials that, when processed through the imagination, emerge as a finished product, a literary symbol, to be marketed as fiction for profit (Gilmore). The novel thus takes on the character of a factory.”⁶⁵ Fredric Jameson disparages the unique “Hemingway” voice as a species of stylistic narcissism, claiming that the realities of America’s complex social life are “clearly inaccessible to the careful and selective type of sentence which he practices,”⁶⁶ and there are critics of Orwell who urge us to believe that his prescriptions for good prose are oppressive and erroneous,⁶⁷ that passages in “Politics and the English Language” are in need of redlining and revision because they are a ‘mess’,⁶⁸ and that the clarity of his prose and eye for the telling detail mark him as a “congenital empiricist”⁶⁹ and a spokesman for “Anglo-American empirical realism,”⁷⁰ a label that is only a few syllables away from “Anglo-American imperialism,” which Jameson also has in mind. To borrow Spengler’s words from *The Decline of the West*, in an age such as ours, the slogans and catch-words of radical ideologies have no real substance and no real function except to create “will-less tools” of demagogues, for whom “destruction is the true and only impulse” and “who desire to see in the outer world the same chaos as reigns within their own selves.”⁷¹ The writings of celebrity theorists are a case in point and provide an abundant supply of disorderly prose and unprincipled thought.

What makes the postmodern repertoire of negativity especially seductive is that it is a prescription for intellectual license and provides an opportunity to surrender one’s mind and will to collective abstractions. The process almost generates itself.

⁶⁵ Tichi, 220. The character of the novel is anything but a mirror of factory production. As Walter E. Bezanson observes in “*Moby Dick*: Work of Art” (1953), “There is no over-reaching formal pattern of literary structure on which *Moby Dick* is a variation... . It is a free form that fuses as best it can innumerable devices from many literary traditions, including native modes of contemporary expression,” in the Norton Critical Edition of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967), 669.

⁶⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 412. Jameson has it exactly backwards. It is Hemingway who is inaccessible to him, in particular the Nick Adams stories in Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925), which trace the life and intellectual development of his central character Nick Adams from an upper midwestern childhood and adolescence in pre-World-War-I America to the war in Europe and his return, to which one could add the story of Harold Krebs’s homecoming in “Soldier’s Home” and Nick Adams’s return from post-war Europe in the posthumously published story “On Writing,” in which Hemingway, through Adams, describes in detail the world view that informs the “selective type of sentence which he practices.”

⁶⁷ See David Wykes, *A Preface to Orwell* (London: Longman, 1987), 88, and Carol Freedman, “Writing, Ideology, and Politics: Orwell’s ‘Politics and the English Language’ and English Composition,” *College English* (April 1981), 332,

⁶⁸ George Y. Trail, “Teaching Argument and the Rhetoric of Orwell’s ‘Politics and the English Language,’” *College English* (September 1995), 582.

⁶⁹ Carl Freedman, “Antimonies of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984),” in *Critical Essays on George Orwell*, ed. Bernard Oldsey and Joseph Browne (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1986), 93

⁷⁰ Jameson, 367.

⁷¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926–28), vol. 2, 427n.

One catch-word yields a dozen substitutes (this is called “advances in the field”), the individual becomes part of a mass in the “liberated” classroom, works as different as the tragedies of Racine and the novels of Balzac are grouped under the same disparaging labels, and pronouncements in education now seem to come as from a single voice, since all the positive terms in Theorese, such as the “dialogic classroom” and the “problematized” text, help to foster an academic mindset that is more in keeping with a cult of believers than an association of independent minds. Conformity suppresses authority, projects its own oppressive practices onto the culture it attacks, and fills the void it creates with intellectually hollow and, in their practical application, destructive ideals. The decisive fact about theorists and their utopian claims is that their fantasy of the “liberated” classroom is as nihilistic in character as their radical critique of traditional academic life and thought.

A similar condition obtains among terms that carry great prestige value in all propaganda that shields a despotism at its core. There never was a “new, Soviet man” or an “Aryan Superman,” there was no “divine wind” beneath the modern airplane wings of kamikaze pilots, there is no holiness in Al-Qaeda’s “martyrdom operations,” and, in the sheltered and civilized world of the academy, there is no real theory in Theory, neither in the classical Greek sense of theory as the contemplation of the true and beautiful nor in the modern scientific sense of theory as working hypothesis. Indeed, it has no purpose except to “undo positions, rules, and order” through the systematic exposition of radical doctrine, once defined under the fraudulent label of “scientific socialism” and now extended to mean any intellectual rationalization for reducing traditional norms of thought to a “logocentric baggage of words.”

In order for the damage to be complete, however, the ground rules of Theory also require that “masterable knowledge and meaning” become functions of power rather than truth and that the entire project be insulated from opposition, a strategy that Eric Voegelin, in his studies of gnostic revelation, has accurately summed up as “the prohibition of questions.”⁷² Hence the trafficking in specious arguments against legitimate criticism, as in Paul de Man’s “resistance to theory is in fact a resistance to reading,”⁷³ and the persistent smokescreens and self-deceptions of the distillers of “postmodern moonshine,” who mean the subversion of instruction when they celebrate a “deconstructive pedagogy”⁷⁴ and who never take the slightest thought about contradictions between their words and actions, including (1) claiming to have special insights into oppression while enforcing a self-serving jargon, (2) promoting multiculturalism while ignoring the need to study foreign languages, (3) touting

⁷² Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, Inc., 1968), 23–49. *The Communist Manifesto* provides a perfect example of the “prohibition of questions” in Marxist terms: “The charges against communism made from a religious, a philosophical, and, generally, from an ideological standpoint are not deserving of serious examination,” 26.

⁷³ Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory” (1982), in Lodge, 366.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Ray, 46–47: “It may (should?) be that no ‘pieces’ of writing are ever completed in such a class. . . . In other words, a deconstructive pedagogy would devise ways to engage students as active readers—that is, re-writers—of the teachers’ writing—her course. It would encourage students to revise assignments and syllabi, to reject an assigned text and choose new ones.”

Theory as a liberation while parroting the same thoughts, words, and phrases as their academic counterparts, (4) deconstructing everything in sight except their own beliefs and paychecks, and (5) teaching “socially relevant” texts in composition classes while keeping students ignorant of basic knowledge and imprisoned in their subjectivity, which they disguise as student “liberation” and the fostering of “self-esteem.”

In striking contrast to this fog of words and abstractions, Elbow had his sights fixed squarely on writing, and challenged his students by asking whether they wanted to protect their feelings in the face of criticism or learn how to write. That is how a teacher sounds when he is speaking of students as real people and of learning as the pursuit of real knowledge about a piece of the world. By contrast, in “postmodern moonshine,” we have theoretical students, theoretical pedagogy, theoretical aims, and theoretical success. As Miller and other researchers have documented, its only tangible results have been an increase in the number of poorly trained graduates and the suppression of differing points of view through the hiring of like-minded faculty.⁷⁵ Nothing has been left standing, neither the productive examination of “allusion, symbolization, allegory, and mimesis,” which are now seen as an “outmoded vocabulary”⁷⁶ (so much for Erich Auerbach’s magisterial work *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality to Western Literature*), nor even the words “author,” “text,” “objectivity,” “meaning,” or “self,” which supposedly belong to a Western “metaphysics of presence [that] is a myth, a fiction, a linguistic construct.”⁷⁷

Little wonder, then, that the greatest achievement of Theorese, if one can call it that, has been its perpetuation of itself. Whatever else it may claim in its favor or deny in its defense, postmodern theory thrives on negation for the sake of control, to the point where its corrosive arguments and rhetoric, having generated ruinous pedagogies and mountains of execrable prose, now function as a strange and artificial language that has driven out the craft and very substance of genuine English studies. Alien to the community it came to dominate, “the poststructuralist Esperanto of the ‘Theoretically Correct,’”⁷⁸ with its rhetoric of “decentered

⁷⁵ As my old Humanities I instructor, the poet Louis Simpson, observed twelve years ago, “once that kind of hermeticism is ensconced it repeats itself. You hire people like yourself. It’s pretty appalling,” in “Van Doren at 100: Remembering Columbia’s quintessential great teacher,” *Columbia College Today* (Winter 1995), 20. On the same page, John Hollander notes that “a mere ten years ago I would never have talked about responsible work in learned journals as trash. I might say something was uninspired or uninteresting, but I would talk about its reflecting a certain competence. No more.” I have looked in vain for similar observations in more recent issues of the school’s alumni journals.

⁷⁶ Veeser, xii.

⁷⁷ Crowley, 6. In her presentation of deconstructionist theory, Crowley notes that, for Jacques Derrida, the “self” is tied to words,” and from the “assumption of self-presence, it was an easy step to infer a similar presence, or being-here, of all that seems to exist in the world,” 2. Self-identity, however, is “tied” to a good deal more than words, namely, the non-verbal world of inner drives and feelings, our image-making faculties, and the experience of sheer sensations, all of which is the stuff of literature, as it is of daily human life.

⁷⁸ Mac Donald, 39.

helplessness,”⁷⁹ “disambiguated criticism,”⁸⁰ and “the discourse of social paternalism,”⁸¹ bears no resemblance to the richness of language and values that have shaped the discipline since the time of Sir Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry* and Ben Jonson’s *Timber, or Discoveries* and *The English Grammar*. The painful truth is that theorists have a vested interest in promoting destructive practices to marginalize and eliminate a well-educated and critical opposition. Semi-literate and culturally ignorant students, imbued with the propaganda of “postmodern moonshine,” thus guarantee a pool of increasingly radicalized teachers and an even tighter grip on the academy, “under the pretense that education is the secret ally of capitalism which must be destroyed.”

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⁷⁹ Catherine Gallagher, “Marxism and the New Historicism,” in Veesper, 47.

⁸⁰ Jameson, “The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate” (1984), in Lodge, 375.

⁸¹ Judith Lowder Newton, “History as Usual? Feminism and the ‘New Historicism,’” in Veesper, 161.