The Intellectual, the Artist, and the Reader

The assignment from *PMLA* was to write a one-thousand-word letter on "the notion of the intellectual in the twenty-first century"—a letter that should be "double-spaced and . . . avoid using the universal, ungrounded *we*."

That says it all, doesn't it? For what function can the intellectual have in a world that prescribes double-spacing but doesn't permit the first person plural? "We are aiming," wrote Antonio Gramsci in "The Problem of the School" (1919), "to stimulate a mentality of construction, of comrades. . . . Today, after the positive experiences of our Russian comrades, it can and must be otherwise if we want to ensure that their experiences have not been in vain for us." This *us* means the new Italian intellectual class for which and to which Gramsci assumed that he spoke. Or take Edmund Wilson, in his epilogue for *To the Finland Station* (1940): "Let us begin by asking ourselves what we mean, whether we really mean anything definite and fixed, when we casually use the word 'Marxism.'" Here the dreaded *we* is used five times in a twenty-four-word sentence. In *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), the "New York intellectual" Lionel Trilling declares, "As *readers*, as participants in the conscious, formulating part of our life in society, we incline to the antagonistic position." And in *The Senses of Walden* (1981), Stanley Cavell, addressing fellow thinkers, whether within the university or without, observes, "We ought no longer to be as sure as [Matthew] Arnold was that the great philosophical writer is one who builds a system. . . . We are more prepared to understand as philosophy a mode of thought that undertakes to bring philosophy to an end."

The loss of this *we* is a sign that there is no longer a generic intellectual class to which "you" or "I" or "one" might belong. The causes of this large-scale transformation are manifold: the end of the cold war and, with it, of an effective international left; the dominance of money over the old class formations; an often militant identity politics that creates smaller and smaller units for defining the individual; and the increasing commodification and mediazation of society, which prompts even a scholarly journal like *PMLA* to resort to sound bites like the one I am writing. But perhaps the greatest threat to the intellectual life comes from the institution—whether a university, foundation, or professional organization—that supposedly fosters it.

In "The Intellectual Field: A World Apart" (1985), Pierre Bourdieu characterizes intellectuals as "a dominated fraction of the dominant class. They are dominant in so far as they hold the power and privileges conferred by the possession of cultural capital . . . but . . . dominated in their relations with those who hold political power and economic power." Intellectuals "remain loyal to the bourgeois order," because it is the bourgeois order that confers on them whatever power they have. In practice this means that in the late twentieth century institutional intellectuals may profess any number of "radical" ideas but are curiously passive toward the system—the basic university structure, with its conferral of advanced degrees, grading and certification of students, and peer review of scholarly materials for the purpose of tenure or promotion decisions. Those who profess to be intellectuals are naturally reluctant to criticize the professional norms they adhere to, reluctant to ask themselves, for example, why students who have never read Dante need to "know" the Victorian novel or why anyone needs to master a second language or a particular cultural theory. Such hard questions regularly take a backseat to procedural ones like How can our department get more budget lines? or How can we convince the provost we need a medievalist? Note that when it comes to such practical questions, the first person plural is very much alive.

Intellectuals, I would posit, cannot function without at least a degree of independence from this self-perpetuating power structure—a structure that merely replicates the larger system of economic and political power of which it is a part. Are intellectuals after Trilling, after Cavell, therefore becoming an obsolete species? As public voices, probably yes, for no sooner do late-twentieth-century intellectuals enter the arena of TV talk shows or journalism than they find their discourse trivialized and co-opted. But if *intellectuals* refers to inventors of original, oppositional, and productive habits of thinking, I would posit that the species is alive and well—primarily (and paradoxically) among a new breed of artists and poets on the boundaries. Indeed, when I try to apply the adjective *intellectual* to, say, the countless conference papers I have heard over the past decade, I immediately think of David Antin's "talk poem" on Wittgenstein, delivered at the West Coast Humanities Institute, of Charles Bernstein's rich and enigmatic "Blood on the Cutting Room Floor," presented at the 1984 Alabama Poetry Conference, and of Steve McCaffery's send-up of theory dogma in his "Nietzschean Pataphysics," "performed" at the annual ACLA convention in Georgia in 1995. Or I think of two striking talks at MLA conventions: Susan Howe's scholarly and passionate examination of Emily Dickinson's compositional habits and Joan Retallack's "G'L'A'N'C'E'S': A Poetic Essay into Space, Time, Motion," a verbal-visual meditation prompted by a single word, *blue*.

But don't artists and writers also occupy positions within the dominant class and thus find themselves subject to the same constraints as intellectuals? Bourdieu

makes this case, but contemporary culture, at least in the United States, puts so little premium on artistic accomplishment that poets and artists, especially those on the fringe or working in hybrid modes and genres, can afford to be more exploratory than their overspecialized scholarly (and often scholastic) counterparts. For one thing, they may read theory or cultural history out of nothing more than curiosity. More important, not having to pay lip service to the latest fashion, they can produce writings that don't contain a single reference to Judith Butler or Homi Bhabha. True, their essays are not likely to be accepted by *PMLA*, with its standardized format and its policy of anonymous submission, but in recent years these often unaffiliated poet-intellectuals have begun to be visible at MLA and related conventions. And MLA job lists have lately advertised positions calling for a "poet-theorist" or "poet-critic."

Something is happening here that is not yet fully understood. How could the once antithetical categories Art and Intellect come together? Why has "conceptual art" become so important to a younger generation? I don't have the answers to these difficult questions, but it is my conviction that whatever intellectual renewal is in the offing will come from the radical poetic/artistic community—a community in which *I* replaces *Anonymous* and addresses a *you* that is in sync or at least in sympathy. In other words, a newly constituted *we*.

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About twenty years ago, I was introduced to a Mexican literary critic as "un intelectual norteamericano." I understood this phrase, correctly, I believe, to mean "a North American scholar." I recall wondering why he had not said "investigador" or maybe "hombre de letras." Although the incident was of no immediate consequence, the memory of it has returned often through the years as I have considered the meaning of *an intellectual* or *the intellectual*.

I certainly have no objection to being referred to as a scholar or an intellectual or both. But it would be wrong to assume that scholars are the only intellectuals. I can think of many clubs and societies whose members dedicate substantial time to pursuits that must be considered intellectual, even if the members' routine activities are not, strictly speaking, intellectual exercises. I can also think of nonacademics who choose to live in a college or university community because they enjoy the intellectual ambience, to which they contribute according to their interests. Indeed, it seems that the intellectual ambience may be more clearly definable than the intellectual as an individual. While individuals may participate in an intellectual enterprise to varying degrees, it is the enterprise that must be of first concern.

The enterprise may be encyclopedic, but the notion of an individual's possession of encyclopedic knowledge belongs to the past. Clearly, the percentage of knowledge that any individual can have diminishes as the amount of available information expands. For the same reason, the percentage of knowledge held in common by those who participate in the intellectual enterprise necessarily grows smaller. As a result, the community of intellectuals tends to unravel, and the inevitable divisiveness of specialization attracts charges of elitism and pejorative terms like *egghead*. Even the term *think tank* combines rejection and admiration.

Complete specialization is unlikely, however, and most specialists make associations with fields different from their own. They project some hope for society's intellectual component, because they encourage a movement toward reintegration. Such an inclination may appear contrary to the fragmentation of contemporary society, but it has established a beachhead. For example, the natural sciences and the humanities are no longer considered "worlds apart," as they used to be. Scientists and humanists find that they have interrelated concerns and intellectual processes.

It may well be that this unifying tendency, always in tension with its divisive counterpart, is a response to anxiety over the approaching termination of a century and a millennium. It is also possible to view this centripetal force as a reactionary attempt to hold on to some identifiable certainty in the face of the threatening openness of diversity. On the other hand, the unifying tendency may be seen as a new cohesive factor within the chaos of fragmentation. Certainly the renewed communication between the humanities and the natural sciences is a promising development, even if it is no more than a speaking acquaintance. Of course, there are multiple interdisciplinary projects that contribute to the wholeness of intellectual activity. What seems to be largely missing is a relation between intellectual projects and the creative arts. Such an integration is, in my opinion, the best hope for the rejuvenation of the intellectual enterprise. Unquestionably, intellect and creativity are fundamentally related. The missing quality is a sense of this relation in the process of intellectual activity.

The role of literature in developing such a sense of wholeness is fundamental: among the arts, literature is the one that most readily unites the creative and intellectual processes. It is practically impossible to keep words from meaning something; even the most purposefully illogical associations project meaning(s). Conversely, writing that seeks primarily to express meaning is likely to

make as well as mean. The most generally admired literature performs both acts—meaning and making—to a considerable extent. Of course, the ratio of making to meaning can be the subject of interminable discussion involving different works or genres, the other creative arts, the sciences, the humanities, or any other constituent of the intellectual enterprise. The point is not to seek a balance but to cultivate the satisfaction inherent in the awareness of meaning and making as a single act.

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Years ago, at the height of the cold war, I met an East German professor who was visiting Berkeley. We took a long walk, chatting about our shared interests and about the tortured history that made it so difficult for us to meet as colleagues. "We who love Shakespeare, Brueghel, and Montaigne," I said, in a burst of absurd enthusiasm, "should despise the malicious lies our governments tell and join forces to sustain those things that are compellingly beautiful and good." "Excuse me," my acquaintance replied uncomfortably, clearly sensing a trap, "the only lies I am aware of are those told by your government, which seems to me the single greatest threat to humanity."

My way of being an intellectual is to love works like *Hamlet*, *Hunters in the Snow*, and "De l'expérience," and to want to spend my life thinking and talking and writing about them. But I'm not sure that for most people this mode of pleasure would constitute the "role of an intellectual," and my ardent attempt to translate this pleasure into a politics was obviously naive and ridiculous. I am willing to concede the ridiculousness—even at the time I knew I was being foolish, though I couldn't help myself—for I understand quite well that there is no easy passage between a cultivated aesthetic sensibility and a set of political choices in a difficult world.

One of the most sinister characters in the Balkans today is an expert on Shakespeare, and, for all we know, he may be a lover of Brueghel and Montaigne as well. Such things are possible. But it is important to hold on to the sense that there is something scandalously wrong in the cohabitation of viciousness and a delight in beauty. If there is a task ahead for the kind of intellectual I have in mind, it lies in the attempt to forge a more secure link between the love of art and human decency.

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"In everything I have done or said up to now, I seem to recognize two forces, even when they work at cross-purposes," writes Albert Camus in his essay "Return to Tipasa" (*"The Myth of Sisyphus" and Other Essays* [New York: Random, 1955]). "I have not been able to disown the light into which I was born, and yet I have not wanted to reject the servitudes of this time." Camus believed that critical engagement in the social and political world was a necessary servitude and, paradoxically, that intellectuals could only continue to serve the world well if they left it on occasion to repossess a Wordsworthian "light" of childhood innocence and freedom. For without this visceral revisiting of the sensation of freedom, one lost sight of the purpose of political and social struggle. Thus Camus's return to his native light—the Algiers of his youth—during one of the darkest years of the European conflict was a gesture of spiritual regeneration arising from his recognition that "in order to keep justice from shriveling up . . . one must keep intact in oneself a freshness, a cool wellspring of joy, love the day that escapes injustice, and return to combat having won that light."

Like other intellectuals before and after him, Camus temporarily withdrew from his world of "desiccated life, of dead souls," in the hope of retaining immunity to a cultural condition in which "nothing causes wonder any more, everything is known, and life is spent in beginning over again." Blake, Nietzsche, Thoreau, Wittgenstein, Orwell, Schweitzer, Weil, Agee, and more recently James Baldwin, Christopher Lasch, and Philip Rieff—all convey both what Camus describes as the "will to live without rejecting anything of life" and an intense horror of the world. This horror arises out of a special susceptibility to the spectacle of human corruption, a vulnerability to the cruelties and compromises of ordinary life. Incapable of full assimilation because of this rigid morality, intellectuals view the world as outsiders. But they thereby gain the critical distance that constitutes the core of intellectual honesty and substance. Only passionate thought, coupled with principled indifference not merely to institutional rewards but also to the penalties institutions assess on those who are indifferent to their rewards, creates the sort of intellectuality cultures need in order to know themselves and thrive. Can intellectuals in the coming century maintain this complex dance of engagement and disengagement, of servitude and light? I would argue that while the fundamental question intellectuals ask—How ought I, and others, to live?—will not change in the twenty-first century, the conditions under which the question is asked will become inhospitable to an answer.

Ralf Dahrendorf notes that intellectuals have always been society's clowns: unstylish, peculiar, overattentive to abstract questions, underattentive to the opinions of

others ("The Intellectual and Society: The Social Function of the 'Fool' in the Twentieth Century," *On Intellectuals: Theoretical Studies, Case Studies*, ed. Philip Rieff [New York: Anchor, 1970]). Yet despite their vulnerability to institutions and other people, intellectuals convey a magisterial self-confidence that can quiet the laughter of their audiences and create uneasiness. For intellectuals are neither narcissistic, parading their personalities, nor ascetic, maintaining a glacial impersonality as if they are solely conduits for concepts. A culture's embodied affirmation of the reality of an inner self, they are a free contemplative energy yearning for permanent shared truths. Their intensity may expose the moral and mental lassitude of everyone else and may therefore offend. Yet a healthy culture accepts the affronts of its intellectuals, since it understands that evolving serious discriminations out of a nuanced description of a society demands attentiveness, passion, and lack of compromise.

But attentiveness, passion, and lack of compromise are the attributes that an advanced technical, managerial, consumer society confounds. Concentration disperses when the object world thins to images; passion goes when, after sufficient betrayal and confusion, people become affectless and paranoid; conviction falters when everyone self-protectively refuses to make judgments. Some intellectuals today continue to resist these and other stultifying trends; they remain selfless within a therapeutic culture that has largely replaced thoughtful polemic with personal confession, simple in the midst of technomania and social-status display, and astonishing in an unastonished society whose experts arrive at conclusions immediately. They remain Lionel Trilling's "adversarial culture" (*The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* [New York: Viking, 1959]). But for how long?

An adversarial culture, after all, needs a public culture against which to express itself. But by the twenty-first century, a technology of withdrawal—computers, gated communities, cellular phones, automobiles—will have attenuated any public realm. The intellectual's withdrawal from the world was philosophical, tactical; the postmodern American's withdrawal is reflexive, visceral, a response to an inchoate sense of threat. Unlike the intellectual's temporary retreats, the postmodern American's is permanent, based on terror of risk.

Sensing this oncoming social catastrophe, writers like Richard Sennett, Michael Walzer, and Robert Putnam have suggested ways of revitalizing community. Architects have planned communitarian towns. Yet the future clearly belongs to armored isolates. In the transformation of politics into simulacral effects, in the dissolution of social interchange into cyberchat, how will intellectuals situate themselves?

I anticipate that the next century's intellectuals will be driven deeper into monkish retreat from the "desiccated life" of the "dead souls" around them. This removal from the society of the spectacle will be deemed bizarre, but, in a curious twist, the result will not be the final dismissal of the intellectual as a cultural force. On the contrary, there is already evidence of the elevation of the intellectual into a secular god. The general hunger for reality and passion grows apace, as the popularity of Gregorian chant, of Henryk Gorecki's music, and of Sister Wendy Beckett's art criticism suggests. Of course, a people adrift in sterility does not believe what the monks and Gorecki and Sister Wendy believe; such a populace doesn't even believe in the existence of the world. But it desperately needs *their* belief. The intellectuals of the next century will be those whose "task in the world," as a nun explains in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, is to "believe things no one else takes seriously. . . . As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that someone believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are your lunatics. We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible" (New York: Penguin, 1985).

The new servitude of intellectuals, which Camus could not have imagined, will be to model conviction. The content of their convictions will not matter; merely their holding convictions passionately will draw the rest of humanity to their light.

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Today, Tomorrow: The Intellectual in the Academy and in Society

The possibility of democratic mass education is for me the pertinent issue in the debate on the future of intellectuals. The dream of democratic mass education has been to make intellectual culture the possession of every citizen, not just an elite. The dream remains unrealized, only partly because access to quality education is still restricted by race and class. There's another kind of denial of "access" that's experienced by those who *do* get through school and college, a result of the failure of educational institutions to make intellectual culture generally intelligible. Intellectual culture includes diverse skills and forms of knowledge, but for my purposes it can be reduced to the ability to argue, to reflect, to analyze, to criticize, to formulate and contest ideas. Everyone exercises