

CHAPTER ONE

THE CRISIS

FORFEITING OUR MOST VALUABLE ASSET

Surely everyone who teaches in a university noticed, during a span of months in 2011, the wave of bad press. “Why is the overall quality of undergraduate learning so poor?” asked Robert Arum and Josipa Roksa, in an editorial in *The New York Times* that summarized a study that Arum and Roksa had recently published under the antagonistic title, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Their newspaper article appeared on May 14—timed to coincide, no doubt, with commencement ceremonies, and to sour them. “Your So-Called Education,” the headline read, and, in the paragraphs that followed, Arum and Roksa explained that they had tracked several thousand students over four years at more than two-dozen diverse institutions and measured their learning. The study claims that nearly half the students showed no improvement on their test scores during the first two years of college, and more than one-third showed no improvement over the entire four years. “We found that large numbers of students,” add Arum and Roksa, “are making their way through college with minimal exposure to rigorous coursework [and] only a modest investment of effort.” They continue, “The average student spent only 12 to 13 hours per week studying—about half the time a full-time college student in 1960 spent studying.”

The root of the trouble, argue Arum and Roksa, is the culture of consumerism. “The authority of educators has diminished, and students are increasingly thought of, by themselves and their colleges, as ‘clients’ . . .” The results should surprise no one: students “look for ways to attain an educational credential effortlessly and comfortably. And they are catered to accordingly. The customer is always right.” Many schools invest in “deluxe dormitory rooms, elaborate student centers, and expensive gyms,” and make sure that students are “looked after by a greatly

expanded number of counselors who serve an array of social and personal needs.” To compete nationally in this consumerist model of campus life, universities must divert funds from the educational mission and send it instead toward these amenities. Thus, students are taught by fewer and fewer full-time faculty. Still worse, universities measure the performance of these part-time workers primarily through student course-evaluations, which incentivize these teachers to “demand little and give out good grades.”

This latter issue—the ease of getting good grades—also drew attention in the national press that same summer. Two months after the editorial by Arum and Roksa, *The New York Times* reported on a study by Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy that collected data on grades at more than two hundred four-year colleges and universities. They report that, today, about 43% of all letter grades given are A’s, a 28% jump from 1960 and a 12% jump from 1988. While the number of B’s doesn’t seem to have changed much, the upward spike in A’s comes at the expense of the dwindling number of C’s, D’s, and F’s. Rojstaczer and Healy suggest that this trend began in the 1960s and 1970s, because faculty worried that D’s and F’s on a report card could send a young man to Vietnam, and that the trend accelerated in more recent decades for the reasons noted above: the student has become a customer, customer satisfaction is a top priority, and therefore even the most lackluster students can expect grades that will make them fairly happy. The upshot: as an editorial in *The New York Times* of December 10, 2012 put it, “The lack of meaningful academic standards in higher education drags down the entire system” (Carey A27).

Despite the apparent ease of getting good grades and the university’s budgetary allowances for keeping students happy, students are generally miserable. Unprecedented numbers of students, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, are self-medicating to a degree that leads them to seek help in recovering from substance abuse, and a growing number of campuses have created what are called “recovery communities,” a support system explicitly designed to help addicts stay sober during their college years through special clubhouses, recreational opportunities, scholarships, meetings, and courses (Helliker). About twenty colleges this summer formed the Association for Recovery in Higher Education, the article continues, and the recovery communities on these campuses are growing—at Kennesaw State University outside Atlanta, for example, there were only three members in 2008, and by the summer of 2011, there were fifty. If there is no such recovery community on your campus, there might be soon: Texas Tech was recently awarded a \$700,000 grant to tell other universities about its program and how to replicate it. Why? Because, among Americans seeking treatment for

substance abuse, no demographic is growing faster than students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. The number in this age group more than doubled in the first decade of this century.

The diminished sense of well-being is not restricted to those inclined to substance abuse. Again, from *The New York Times*, this time from January 27, 2011: “The emotional health of college freshman . . . has declined to its lowest level since an annual survey of incoming students started collecting data 25 years ago.” The article, under the headline, “Record Levels of Stress Found in College Freshman,” reports on a study of more than 200,000 incoming, full-time students at four-year colleges, and it notes that the number of students who claim “above average mental health” has dropped by more than 10% since the mid-1980s (Lewin A1). The study, corroborated by anecdotes from overwhelmed college-counselors, suggests that the global economic downturn of 2008 accounts for rising levels of depression and anxiety among today’s entering frosh.

Very little that students encounter in their classrooms mitigates this misery. When students are taught by adjunct faculty, as more and more are—people with impossibly low salaries, zero job security, and little chance of improving their situation—their negative attitude is likely corroborated by the teachers. But even if they are taught by tenured faculty, those who would seem to be in precisely the opposite circumstances, they are learning from people who, according to a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 3, 2012) seem to be “some of the unhappiest people in academe,” beleaguered by “exhaustion, doubt, and even depression,” their reserves of energy and idealism mostly wiped out by the job search, then the long, bedeviling grind toward tenure or gobbled up by the mundane administrative burdens that, as humanities departments in particular are downsized, must be carried by fewer and fewer people.

Regardless of the disposition of the person teaching the class, the sheer cost of a university education might undermine students’ faith in the value of our courses. Consider yet one more nasty article about universities from the *New York Times* in—once again—the summer of 2011. In the “Room for Debate” feature of August 23, nine different leaders in discussions of higher education addressed the worth of what we offer: “Americans are spending more and more on education,” the feature began, “but the resulting credentials . . . seem to be losing value in the labor market.” The lead-off respondent, PayPal cofounder Peter Thiel, said the same thing, only more viciously: “For some people in some careers, some colleges may be worth the price they charge.” However, “[M]illions of other people are paying more than quadruple what their parents paid 25 years ago (plus inflation) for a

vague credential, not much knowledge or skills, and a crippling amount of debt.” He then draws a withering comparison: “Five years ago, the establishment was saying, ‘Everyone should buy a house. Don’t worry about the price. You’ll earn it all back later. What could go wrong?’ We know how that ended.” For Thiel, the upshot: “spending four years in a lecture hall with a hangover” is an “antiquated debt-fueled luxury good” that Americans must learn to live without.

Our courses are worth nothing—or, given the debt students incur to take them, they actually have a negative value.

These dissatisfactions are hardly new. Well over a decade has passed since Mark Edmundson published his widely discussed polemic, “On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students,” in which he identified what then seemed a new kind of weather gathering in the culture of universities. Edmundson suggests that, shortly after World War II, with the help of the GI Bill, college enrollments grew a great deal, universities expanded accordingly, and soon thereafter they expanded yet more to accommodate the baby boomers; but because schools expand much more easily than they contract (faculty get tenured, can’t be let go; and administrators aren’t eager to cut their own positions), universities, after the last of the baby boomers graduated, had little choice but to market themselves aggressively to fill their classrooms. This, says Edmundson, “meant creating more comfortable, less challenging environments, places where almost no one ever failed, [and] everything was enjoyable . . .” He quotes an administrator who, in only mild hyperbole, said that admissions offices now more closely resemble marketing firms, and he notes that, “as soon as someone enters his junior year of high school, and especially if he’s living in a prosperous zip code, the informational material—the advertising—comes flooding in.” And he adds that, because these advertisements constitute most students’ first encounter with the university, many of them inevitably continue to define their experience of the place essentially the way a shopper would, that is, as a consumer. Thus, they show little enthusiasm or passion for what they encounter in their courses, no matter how hard we try to unveil for them the profundities in this or that benchmark of civilization, no matter how vexing the revelations we try to design for them. Rather, they evince, “on good days, a light, appealing glow; on bad days, shuffling disgruntlement,” much as though they were running an errand at the mall.

Edmundson, writing about his students in 1997, foregrounded the role of the economy in this comedy: “They’re aware of the fact that a drop that looks more and more like the Grand Canyon separates the top economic tenth from the rest of the population.” And so, inevitably, they

are quite cautious, tolerating a relatively boring, risk-averse relation to the content of their courses—dispassionate, nonserious, low-stakes—because the business of getting an educational credential itself couldn't have much higher stakes. "We may be on a conveyor belt," they suppose, in Edmundson's view, "but its [*sic*] worse down there on the filth-strewn floor. So don't sound off, don't blow your chance." Ultimately, Edmundson concludes that his students lack any fire for their courses, any real desire to grow, because, most pointedly, they "lack the confidence to acknowledge what would be their most precious asset for learning: their ignorance." In short, Edmundson's students, in the mid-1990s, didn't feel safe and secure enough to engage directly with what they didn't know.

Edmundson calls what they don't know their ignorance, but in what follows, I'll call it the unconscious—that knowledge that, as Elizabeth Ellsworth says, we passionately disavow or ignore, and that, again, when we have the courage to engage it, is our most precious asset for learning (62). It is that part of the individual that exceeds the individual, the discourse of the other, Lacan will call it, the realm of desire as that which is always borrowed from—and directed—elsewhere, and thus is always at odds with the ego's fantasy of autonomy. Unconscious desire is what divides us from ourselves and links us to each other. In this sense, the unconscious functions much like a public. It is what—in the context of overwhelming financial anxiety—we don't have the confidence to engage, that most valuable resource that we forfeit.

Another assumption: if Edmundson's students in the mid- to late 1990s didn't have the confidence in themselves or in their world to dialogue with what they didn't or couldn't know, consider how much more acute must this phenomenon be in the wake of the last decade: the failed presidential election of 2000, the terrorist attacks of the following year, the eight-year war in Iraq that turned out to have been triggered by bogus intelligence, the much longer and even less conclusive quagmire in Afghanistan, the botched response to the failures of the federal levees after Hurricane Katrina, and, of course, the financial downturn of 2008, which has struck at the very heart of the consumer culture that owns so many students. What Edmundson casts, in the mid- to late 1990s, as boredom and superficiality among undergraduates has surely morphed by now into a bitter anxiety about the social structures they are inheriting and the job market they face after graduation and, most pointedly, the costs they will incur in the meantime.

Whatever is draining university classrooms of the high regard they may once have enjoyed, surely no one would dispute that campuses could do a great deal more to enable positive forms of human connection. In Terry

Eagleton's words, we need to invent new forms of belonging (21). Or to put it in ways that may seem awfully old-fashioned, even crusty, to today's readers, we need a new set of standards, a fresh articulation of our values, a way of organizing our reflections on how we interact with students, a scheme for guiding these interactions, and improving them. Some might hear what I'm saying as a plea to get tougher when we grade, but that's far too simple. We should not simply give more C's on student work, but rather judge their work—and ourselves—more carefully, more rigorously. We need a new way of talking about how we talk with students.

We need, most specifically, the conceptual tools of psychoanalysis in order to speak to, with, and about what we can't know, to re-access our most valuable asset for learning—the unconscious. In fact, if the classroom itself can be thought of as a miniature emblem of public space, of inter-subjective desire, of the unconscious, then perhaps that's why it has become in recent years an object of such vitriol. Precisely because we live in such a rattled era that no one has the confidence, much less the courage, to engage its potentials, it has become a target for aggressive critique sponsored by empirical studies that naively hope to measure gains in knowledge. In the most extreme eruptions, it becomes a hunting ground for crazed gunmen bent on mass slaughter.

THE ROOTS OF OUR CRISIS

My project partially echoes Thomas Rickert's *Acts of Enjoyment: Rhetoric, Žižek, and the Return of the Subject*, when he asks why our pedagogy so often seems relatively ineffectual: we train students to be attentive critics of culture and ideology, yet this training all too rarely induces real transformation in their lives (3). Rickert suggests that perhaps we need to understand that “the performative and symbolic aspects of pedagogy are as important, if not more so, than the specific content” (207). In other words, *how* we teach might shape students more directly than *what* we teach. What, then, are the key points to bear in mind as we devise our relationships with our students? Most of us embraced, quite some time ago, the Freirean, decentered classroom, so why then aren't more of our students becoming the awakened, engaged activists that, presumably, they should become? What are we, in our conversations with them, *not* doing?

What if our students' uncanny ability to decipher the sorts of people we are and their deep-seated impulse to mimic us explain their reluctance to discover, in themselves, a meaningful sense of agency and desire with respect

to their course materials and wider culture? Are they simply following our lead, as our own doubts about agency spread to them? I think my hunch would be confirmed by John Schilb, who, as editor of *College English*, spoke, at the MLA in December 2009, about this pervasive preoccupation with the issue of agency that he sees in manuscripts submitted to the journal: “Many of us are earnestly, even frenziedly trying to develop a theory of it, in the belief that otherwise we’ll lose it.” And he continues, “Our nervous harping on agency is driven by a dubious assumption: namely that in order to intervene in the world, we must have a full-blown theory of how our behavior can matter.” Until we have such a theory, such a justification in hand, we suppose that can’t do anything else—that is, that we’re stuck, and our Prufrockian hand-wringing over how to proceed only drives our students ever deeper into slackerdom.

This problem began, argues Terry Eagleton, early in the twentieth century, when, in the aftermath of the First World War, artists were working through the impossibility of restoring what they saw as the comforts of the old, relatively well-ordered universe of the nineteenth century; by roughly 1960, however, these artists had become familiar, even domesticated, and the challenging, heroic-dissident strain in their pessimistic vision migrated to the realm we’ve come to call theory. The phase from roughly 1965 to 1980, says Eagleton, saw the extraordinary, now famous projects of theory-building, and given the mandate to pessimistic dissent inherited from the artists of the 1920s and ’30s, these theories focused on what lay just beyond theory’s reach, the stuff that no one can ever fully articulate: difference, the unconscious, the body, desire. This movement eventually exhausted itself, Eagleton claims, and by 1980, had largely collapsed. In its wake, intellectuals became preoccupied with the local: “micropolitics,” Eagleton quips, “broke out on a global scale.” And the new object of study—“culture”—took shape through the widespread assumption that theory was sheer futility. By 1989, the two greatest proponents of what Eagleton casts as the new “anti-theory,” Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish, had decided that theory was merely an attempt to justify one’s way of life. That is, it seeks to give you reasons for living the way you do, an explanation; but, for Rorty and Fish, this is ultimately neither possible nor necessary. As Eagleton paraphrases them, “You cannot justify your way of life by theory because theory is part of your way of life, not something set apart from it.” And what counts as a “legitimate reason or valid idea will be determined by your way of life itself. So cultures have no foundation in reason. They just do what they do” (54). In short, for the antitheorists, cultures cannot be theorized or evaluated, because you are always either judging from within some culture, your remarks redundant

and complicit, or you're outside it and thus ultimately uninformed.

This obituary on high theory—in fact, on all thinking—would be corroborated by Edmundson, who contends that, in the classroom, we've seen the flowering of cultural studies as, at worst, a vapid substitute for thinking: the students-as-customers “[get] what they most want—easy pleasure, more TV”; that is, increasingly light and directionless chatter about what students like and don't like about, say, the latest Madonna album. In short, in the absence of any critical framework or distance, any theory, the classroom becomes a place where students merely “groove to the product.”

To resurrect theory—that is, the sense that one can and must interpret, analyze, reflect on and converse with what one does not already “understand,” to construct thereby tentative meanings, possible ideas, to experiment with them and the new purposes, desires, and conversations they engender—this, says Eagleton, is the project at hand. Rather than simply substitute “culture” as the new foundational term, where God or Nature or Reason once stood, a bottom line or endgame for all of our work; rather than suppose that we are such pure products of our time and place that we cannot step outside of that context to theorize it or criticize it or even engage in genuine dialogue with it; rather than accept our paralysis and pass it along to our students as the essential lesson they learn from us; rather than despair over our inability to rise to some impossible, transcendent spot from which to mount critique, we should instead embrace the fact that part of our culture is an array of habits and modes for critical dialogue and interpretation, a vast array of strategies for haggling over value and meaning. This, Eagleton would argue, is what we should pass along to our students.

In fact, as Eagleton says, this is a key way that humans differ from other animals; it's not simply that we interpret things whereas they do not (all sensory faculties in all animals are mechanisms that enable creatures to interpret their surroundings). Rather, humans differ because they can interpret their interpretations, and this doubling or reflexivity is what makes us human. We can think about our own thoughts, contemplate their limits, delineate, in turn, our ignorance, the places where what we know sheers off into that which is distinctly other and not known. In other words, culture, says Eagleton, is not a prison house, neither is language; rather, within them are sets of tools for interpreting our interpretations of the external, material, and social world, for engaging and interacting with that world with increasing complexity, subtlety, and power. More to the point: cultures are always porous, they open onto the *other*, and even as they strive to locate and script a role for this other, this otherness constitutes more than enough free space from which or with which to mount dialogue, the

sort of critical interpretation, reflection, and analysis that are the definitive, even signature activities of the human. After all, no matter how much we pretend to the contrary, this other, from which or through which or by which we are spurred to interpret, is always with us—our primary asset, as noted earlier, for learning.

It's the unconscious, what I'm calling pedagogy's other side. As Eagleton puts it, "Human bodies are not self-sufficient. [Rather] there is a gaping hole in their make-up known as desire, which makes them eccentric to themselves" (129)—that is, always attuned to the other, as that which they cannot fully know but rather can only interpret and must interpret, continuously, as an essential activity of desire. Indeed, all the processes of the human subject, its development, its knowledge, its enjoyment, its efforts to communicate, all these are necessarily transpersonal or intersubjective phenomena, all suffused with desire, a force that, again, divides us from ourselves and links us to each other, and, as such, is mostly repressed, rendered unconscious by the ego's fantasy of autonomy.

As I'll show, an especially useful tool for the ongoing work of interpreting desire—for most fully inheriting our humanity—is a particular rhetoric called psychoanalysis. To say it another way, as Elizabeth Ellsworth does, to be human is to have an unconscious, and I maintain that the most powerful rhetoric we have for advancing our humanity, for advancing our conversation with the unconscious—for advancing, in William Covino's wonderful phrase, the art of wondering as a prerequisite for learning—is the discourse I place at the top of my developmental scheme, the discourse of analysis.

This is what I felt I saw in that service-learning course that provided the initial spark to this book, the course in which my students (all of them white) tutored seventh-graders (all of them black) at a nearby junior-high school here in New Orleans. My students in that course reached further and further into dialogue with worlds that differed sharply from their own, became deeply energized by the experience, and produced work that they felt to be the most valuable schoolwork they had ever done. They were growing and changing before my eyes, becoming the sorts of artists/activists that heretofore they had only revered from afar, in so far as they had ever been able to imagine such a type. They were, while doing the work of that course, engaging what it means, in Eagleton's terms, to be human—the humanities—as fully as possible. It was serious fun.

But this does not mean that they had written their way into some sort of triumphant and absolute connection to each other, to me, to the seventh graders they tutored, or, for that matter to anyone else. The class project was not in any obvious, straightforward sense a "success." However,

our various disconnections did not fuel a crisis of confidence in our work, did not share in the broader despair that purportedly colors campus life in our time. On the contrary, it spurred them to keep playing, to feel that their revolution, as they came to call it, had only begun.

Unfortunately, this disconnection, in our time, is interpreted only as failure, and hence the rash of nasty “studies” reported in the *New York Times* in recent years. But, as my students would insist, there is a very different way to understand this disconnection: it can spur the desire to try harder, to dig deeper, to explore and experiment with yet more imagination and ambition.

FORMS OF DISCONNECTION: THE FOUR DISCOURSES AS MODES OF ADDRESS

Traditionally, the topic of modes of address, as Elizabeth Ellsworth explains, is used to question how the dynamics of social positioning get played out in the viewing of a film: viewers implicitly ask themselves, “who does this film think I am, and am I willing to be that person? Will I enjoy and benefit from that identification—or recoil from it—and to what degree?” She adds that the viewer is never simply, singularly who a particular film thinks the viewer is. And good filmmakers understand this, so they create multiple “entry points” or places where the viewer might choose to identify. Moreover, viewers are capable of temporarily adopting identifications that would seem to violate what they consciously espouse as their values. Owing to all this complexity, flexibility, and movement, many have come to think of a film’s mode of address as not a static, stable structure, whereby the film tries to “fit” a viewer; instead, the mode(s) of address, in addition to being always plural, become fluid “events” of more or less fleeting, overlapping intervals with ultimately indeterminate boundaries (26).

As with films, so with college courses: when you teach, argues Ellsworth, you take up certain positions within structures and relations of power, knowledge, and desire, and you invite students to take up corresponding positions—or, rather, you insist. And students basically follow along. As Mike Rose noted in *Lives on the Boundary*, “Students will float to the mark you set” (26) and take on—sometimes with a vengeance—the identities you assign them. How you address students thus has a lot to do with who students come to think themselves to be. Teachers, in short, play an important role in shaping their students’ relationships to power, in shaping how they configure the dynamics of knowledge, ignorance, unconscious desire, otherness, and in turn, their prospects for developing the ability to interpret their thoughts and experiences (6).

Yet despite the utter centrality of the concept of modes of address to any understanding of processes of teaching and learning, these modes can be nearly impossible to discern and engage effectively. Ellsworth continues, “The workings of power and social positioning in the pedagogic relationship—especially a pedagogical relation with all good intentions—can be delicate and seemingly intangible.” Unlike “nearly straight, highly visible . . . high-tension wires” these pathways of fleeting, partial identification are like “thin stringy traces. . . like the twisty and entwined chocolate bands running through a marbled cake.” She adds, “Try to follow one of those bands. Better yet, try to extract one for a good look” (6).

The difficulty of consciously engaging this issue of modes of address in our teaching is only a prelude to a much greater challenge: the paradox by which modes of address, despite their overwhelming power to dictate who teachers and students together become, *also always fail*. That is, Ellsworth argues, pedagogies *always* address students in ways that are clumsy, ham-fisted, and way off the mark; and they do so not simply because, say, they would seem to hold out the invitation to something exciting, but then deliver something that intermittently veers in student experience toward the deadly boring. Rather, inherent in the very concept of modes of address is this incontrovertible reality of failed connection, because even when one addresses one’s self, this gesture is always shot through with fantasy, desire, and aspiration, marred by inadequacy and incompleteness and the equally biased voices and bent perspectives of others, so much so that one can never quite know for sure where one stands or who one is on one’s own terms, much less in the eyes of some other, still much less who and where those others might be. Lacan himself, in an especially provocative iteration of this idea that perfect connection between people is impossible, said, in Seminar XX of 1972–73, that “There is no such thing as a sexual relationship” (*Le Séminaire* 17).

Ellsworth would likely argue that students neither learn exactly what we teach nor precisely when we teach “it,” nor do any two students learn quite the same “it.” As she points out, “Pedagogy, when it ‘works,’ is unrepeatable and cannot be copied, sold, or exchanged—it’s ‘worthless’ to the economy of educational accountability” (16–17). Ellsworth continues, “the discontinuities that inevitably foil communicative dialogue invite us to think of pedagogy not as representational practice but as performative act,” as in Thomas Rickert’s point noted earlier. It is not about “explaining” or “representing” something that is elsewhere but is rather better understood in terms of creating an event in the here and now, a dynamic performance suspended between self and other, between prevailing categories and systems of thought, between what precedes and what follows the eureka moment of intellectual growth.

To be a great teacher, in this light, is not to achieve somehow perfect communication with your students, in which they take full possession of exactly the same contents you command. This fantasy, so central to the discourse of mastery, so disturbing from an ideological standpoint, will always, thank God, fail. In contrast, to be a great teacher is to assume the “failure” (the ignorance, the unconscious) noted above and transform it into a spur for ongoing, creative reflection, critical dialogue and inquiry, a springboard for the adventure of insight, a constantly renewed opportunity for more thinking, more talking, more writing, more learning, and more growth.

Unfortunately, as Ellsworth notes, the teacher’s job is too often “framed as one of neutralizing, eliminating, or distracting students from the differences between what a curriculum ‘says’ and what a student gets . . .” Nonetheless, she continues, “As long as classroom relations are shaped by broader social, racial, gender and economic antagonisms [as they always will be], educators cannot foreclose the space of difference between address and response” (41), and cannot close down “the fear, fantasy, desire, pleasure, and horror that bubble up in the social and historical space between [people]” (41). Drawing on James Donald, Ellsworth suggests that we most often deal with this volatile, differentiating space between the curriculum and what student’s “get” or “take away,” between, for that matter, any addressor and addressee, through popular cultural forms. For example, horror films, or any other spectacle of the monstrous, the grotesque, the uncanny, from *Beowulf* to whatever opens at the multiplex this Friday, all of these forms, suggests Ellsworth via Donald, are ways we figure and thereby strive to deal with, perhaps even vanquish, what doesn’t fit into the fantasy of perfect and complete transaction between communicators.

In genuine growth, however, we don’t vanquish these monsters, but rather flag them as positive. Indeed, if there were such a thing as salvation, they would be markers on that pathway; not demons we should flee, but the stars that help us navigate. This open-ended embrace of the monstrous is its own reward, of course, the only salvation.

More specifically, when we intuitively assume that there must be more to us than purely and simply what the institution of school thinks we are, when we resist in countless ways the banalities of absolute normalization, when we capitalize on the “noise” that disrupts the ideal of perfect communication and insist instead on a certain excess, we arrive at what psychoanalysis calls the unconscious, and the unconscious is what prevents the dreary totalitarian dream of total control and points the way instead to experiences of desire, a sense of agency, in the public sphere. If there were a perfect fit between what school says we are and what we really are,

then that would be the end of all dialogue, all struggle, all negotiation, all movement, all the oscillating vicissitudes of consensus, dissensus, and desire, ultimately all humanity—the triumph of the totalitarian machine (50). And again desire generally aims in the opposite direction; desire, at last, *is* this insurgency, this insistence on differentiation, on excess, even an excess with (dis)respect to what we can consciously know; that is, it is largely unconscious. And it is a monster that must be vanquished only if seen from within a bureaucratic, totalitarian fantasy of absolute control and perfect communication. Otherwise, again, it guides the path forward. This is the project of psychoanalysis.

TOWARD A PSYCHOANALYTIC KNOWLEDGE—
A SCIENCE OF THE PARTICULAR, A RHETORIC OF THE
UNCONSCIOUS—FOR THE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

The project of psychoanalysis is beautifully illustrated by Paul Verhaeghe in *On Being Normal* through the contrast of two scenarios. When a child exhibits certain symptoms such as a rash and fever, the parents will take the child to a doctor who will look at the child and link the symptoms together and, in turn, to a generalized syndrome on an objective continuum of health and illness, then set forth a treatment that will return the child to a prior optimal state. However, in contrast, suppose a teenage boy has developed the habit of stealing cars and joyriding down the highway in them: his parents insist that he speak to a different kind of doctor, one who will listen to him and develop an interpretation of the roots of the behavior that extend well beyond the boy himself; the doctor will explore how the teenager has unwittingly inherited certain conflicts from his parents and their relationship, and how he is perhaps unconsciously striving to reconcile these conflicts, to regain something that these conflicts, he feels, are costing him, by producing the symptom that is the problematic behavior. The more the doctor listens to the boy, the less he will link the symptoms to a generalized syndrome, and the more he will connect them to increasingly particularized roots that are not simply unique to the boy but extend into the particulars of the intersubjective web in which the boy is, as humans always are, unconsciously imbricated. In Verhaeghe's example of the teen-aged car thief, it turns out that the boy only steals Mercedes, that his mother comes from a well-to-do family in a nearby town named Mercedes, that the boy always ditches the cars there after an evening of joyriding, that the father is a working-class striver who has prospered and whose wife

(the boy's mother) is betraying with a secret lover. What exactly does all of this mean? Whatever it means, it means only in this case, making it very different from the fever and rash that, in the other case, the other doctor called chicken pox and cured with a standard prescription. It differs too in the way it is transmitted: chicken pox moves from one person to another via germs that are always the same; the other boy's problem, however, arises from within the spaces between people via symbols that are always unique. Thus, as Verhaeghe puts it, psychoanalysis is a science of the particular, and, as such, its understandings are always limited, tentative, provisional—that is, they are interpretations, efforts to think about and talk with what we can never fully know, the project Eagleton puts at the center of our humanity and that Lacan teaches us to call the discourse of analysis.

In sum, the analyst's goal will be to extend an interpretation, as far as possible into the particular by way of replacing the less communicative "interpretation" of his life that the boy is setting up via the activity of stealing cars and joyriding. But the analyst's interpretation is by no means absolutely communicative. Unlike the medical doctor, he has never been asked to understand in any absolutely complete way; has never been required to disavow the unconscious and his or her own full complicity in it. In contrast, the medical doctor seeks a communicative dialogue that ultimately transcends the distance between two people, an erasure of difference, and in turn all unconscious desire. It is repression, a will to ignorance that often articulates itself as the inability to tolerate multiple possibilities of interpretation, and, in turn, the inability to play with different meanings, perhaps the inability to do anything at all but mechanically repeat the insistence on the illusion of the sameness.

Thus, a psychoanalytic pedagogy does not cast knowledge and ignorance as quantities in a binary ratio, as when college graduates would say that after four years of college, they now "have" more knowledge and less ignorance, and that therefore they got their money's worth and can be counted another satisfied customer. Rather we need to understand learning (development, growth) not in terms of knowledge that is opposed to ignorance, but rather in terms of knowledge that is more and more dynamically—critically, creatively—engaged with ignorance, with the passion to ignore that is the unconscious.

As Elizabeth Ellsworth says, this passion for ignorance is shaped by cultural norms that code desire and knowledge into categories of illicit and licit (62), and most broadly, desire seeks to delete any knowledge that would threaten one's public self-image, one's ego. Again, the passion to ignore (to be ignorant, and therefore innocent) and the passion to learn are not in a

simple binary dynamic; rather they are like different sides of the same sheet of paper that one keeps crumpling up and flattening out and then recrumpling anew as the continuous activity of the human subject (Ellsworth 52). That is, when the unconscious represses something, it does not tuck it away in some remote recess, like buried treasure; rather it has simply been encoded in symbols that our conscious selves aren't inclined to interpret; and, as such, the "repressed" is always hiding in plain sight and continues to speak all the time through metaphors and symbols (68)—that is, through a rhetoric, a rhetoric that in the discourse of analysis, one interprets and engages and uses for the most careful and well-informed response possible. A rhetoric of the unconscious.

A rhetoric, of course, is what writing teachers help their students to use more and more ambitiously. And so what I'm proposing here is that we writing teachers learn to think with and to model for our students, even to teach a special kind of rhetoric, one that will trigger significant, even ongoing growth for them, a tool for learning long after they've left our classrooms. Granted, many who think about the teaching of writing agree that students only really learn their course materials when they are writing about them, that the sorts of cognitive activities involved in creating a text are the same as those involved in creating an understanding, and ultimately that learning to write is the quintessential form of all learning, the tool that makes all other learning possible. But I'm offering here a more radical and strange idea: that psychoanalysis serves in these same ways that writing does, that, more specifically, a rhetoric of the unconscious hinges on an inherent incompleteness or irreconcilable lack that it articulates as the permanent open-endedness of dialogue, the art of wondering; a rhetoric of the unconscious that one can't resist dabbling in when one is writing, when one is learning. The more deliberately one can do this, the more informed one's dabbling in this rhetoric, the greater success one is likely to have in the projects of writing and learning, of articulating new knowledge and conveying its meaning to a reader. Thus, what we teach when we teach writing is how to have a more and more articulate dialogue with the unconscious, which is what the discourse of analysis is, what it teaches.

RAISING THE DEAD

In the early weeks of 2012, on a chilly and blustery evening in Brooklyn (to be exact, the date was Friday the 13th), a funeral was held for psychoanalysis. The event was orchestrated by Jamieson Webster, whose book, *The*

Life and Death of Psychoanalysis was published the preceding September. The funeral included eulogies from ten others. Psychoanalysis, they all agreed, had died, and no part of it, Peter Taubman would suggest, could be deader than its links to the world of teaching and learning.

As Taubman eloquently describes the breakdown of any potential dynamic between the two, “the current drive in the United States to align public education with various corporate agendas, and equate teaching and curriculum with scripts, scores, and job-preparation,” means that, “current educational approaches and policies . . . aspire to the control, predictability, and objective standards associated with the medical profession.” Meanwhile, he notes, psychoanalysis itself has been largely replaced by psychopharmacology and short-term therapies.

One could hardly imagine a more fitting obituary, *avant la lettre*, for the present book. On the other hand, the date of that funeral for psychoanalysis is commonly understood to signify bad luck, and thus any undertaking made on that day must backfire: the repressed will always return, and the grave they dug for psychoanalysis would surely be an unquiet one, perhaps an unwitting launch pad, and psychoanalysis is now thereby poised, thanks to its gravediggers and eulogists, for an uncanny resurrection.

If so, that process might well start on university campuses, for, at the clinical level, some have begun to note its relevance to the ordinary concerns of campus life. In the summer of 2011, the same summer that saw so much troubling representation of undergraduate experience in the popular press, the journal *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* devoted a special issue to college counseling, particularly because, as Richard Eichler puts it, psychoanalysis can “reawaken developmental potential” in college students (4). Eichler continued, “When psychoanalysis is understood as a way of thinking about development and the capacity for growth and change, it has much to offer for creatively shaping efficacious short-term counseling interventions and for addressing the clinical dilemmas commonly encountered in college mental health practice” (289).

Part of what could spur the resurrection of psychoanalysis in the culture at large is the collapse of the credibility of the psychopharmaceutical industry that would seem to have supplanted much talk-therapy—an industry that has created a demand for its products that it cannot satisfy. As Marcia Angell puts it, “Americans are in the midst of a raging epidemic of mental illness, at least judged by the numbers treated for it.” She continues, “The tally of those who are so disabled by mental disorders that they qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) increased nearly two and a half times between 1987 and

2007.” For those of us who teach, the rise in the numbers of children treated for mental illness is even more disturbing: “a thirty-five fold increase.” She adds “mental illness is now the leading cause of disability in children, well ahead of physical disabilities like cerebral palsy or Down’s Syndrome.” She continues, “About ten percent of Americans over the age of six now take anti-depressants, and the new drugs to treat psychosis have replaced cholesterol-lowering agents as the top-selling class of drugs in the US” (20).

Is it really possible that, in contemporary America, psychosis is a more common problem than high cholesterol? Or are the drug manufacturers also manufacturing new forms of illness, new markets, coaching doctors to see new uses for the substances they cook up? The latter seems more likely, and, as the credibility of psychopharmacology erodes, and the sense of well-being among contemporary Americans does too, perhaps psychoanalysis is poised to gain new ground, to reenter our conversations about experiences and relationships and goals. At the very least, it would seem poised to enter conversations among faculty as a tool for talking about our teaching and for thinking about how to have better conversations with students, especially about their writing.