Restraining Order

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My best student last term—a nineteen-year old woman named Catherine D., the child of refugees from Vietnam, who spoke only Vietnamese before she began to learn French in elementary school—disliked English throughout the better part of her education. Alongside and inflected through the painstaking mastery of English morphology, syntax, rhythm (and the innumerable other ways by which a language comes into the body and becomes a way of being in the world) was, inevitably, the political question: the predication *in* language upon which the social subject may be said—metaphorically, but in strikingly literal ways—to be conjugated. For Québécois students, this besetting question is intellectually productive precisely to the extent that it is irresolvable; the language of the Canadian and American-imperial colonizers arouses fascination and fear, and must remain the object of continual negotiation. It is therefore both ironic and entirely predictable that Catherine has become an English major, and an exceptional one. She moves easily among the registers of French, from *la langue soutenue* to *le gros Québécois;* her spoken English is unaccented; she writes and thinks better than many graduate students; she is already proficient in Spanish and Italian.

Quite apart from her enviable talents, her exceptionality is produced in many ways by the exception that is Montréal, which is to say, Canada. If

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Montréal is the Distinct Society *within* the Distinct Society, then these double distinctions, far from cancelling each other, generate the cultural positive that has formed Canada's national imaginary for thirty years: surely this city, where most people function in both official languages, and where a long and continually-evolving history of multicultural richness compels a tolerance that is neither facile nor *facile,* is where Canada has been most fully realized. For Catherine D., a Canadian and a *Québécoise,* the world is her oyster. Her good fortune to be here, at this cultural moment, is a cogent reminder that in the field of identity-politics, language is not a zero-sum game. Now, to avoid sliding by degrees into an apology for federalism (which is really another matter, and one on which I remain both indifferent and oddly passionate), I shall take up the question, "what remains of English Studies?" I do so, however, without quite taking leave of Catherine D., who stubbornly endures in my imagination, long after the semester has ended, as a vivid example of what binds my engagement to this academic thing that used to be a discipline.

But before Catherine D. takes out a restraining order to inhibit my perseverating on her case history, notwithstanding its laudatory manner, let me reframe the question with my own recent history. In the summer of 2002, I left my position at the University of Calgary for one at Université de Montréal. I wanted better cheese, older buildings, wrought-iron, more irony, a certain rigour around *les plaisirs quotidiens,* slicker shoes, hardwood floors and ten-foot ceilings, the pearly grey light of a Montréal winter afternoon. And, bored by the dessicating predictability of raceclassgender, the template of the *au courant* English-Canadian English Department, I wanted frankly a kind of respite in an academic environment in which "the political" would be framed differently. In short, I wanted French. Let me say at the outset that I highly recommend a mid-career move which, ideally, ought to occur before habits, bad or otherwise, have ossified beyond repair: a smart relocation, when combined with a daily regime of *L'Occitane en Provence* skin-care products, is incredibly rejuvenating. (Human nature being what it is, I now think longingly of western clarities, aridities, and sharpnesses—of big sky country, in short.) Upon arriving in Montréal, I found myself subject to several species of recall. The first, and least pleasant, was the fact that professors of English are entirely reliant upon the McGill University library, which tends to recall books before one has unpacked them from one's briefcase. The second continues to be a visceral appetite for French: my name here isn't "Savoy;" it is "Savoie," which is a recall to my Acadian forebears, who, upon inter-marriage with Irish Catholic immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century, lost their language and (sort of) their name. I am the first member of my family in five generations to speak French, which has occasioned a

daily contemplation of the circuits of identity and the occlusions of history: it isn't at all the *"je me souviens"* of the Québécois, *parce que je ne peut pas me souvenir, mais je fais l'effort quand même;* moreover, never before have I understood myself to be so thoroughly English-Canadian, something that no degree of Francophilia can, or ought to, undo. Finally—and here I land belatedly on my subject—I find myself recalled to the pleasures of pedagogy. Why here? Why now?

The answers have something to do with the strangeness, the inevitable defamiliarization, that accompanies the teaching of literature in a second-language university program: my own progress in French is the mirror image of my students' initiation into English. To move daily toward the culture of one's students is also to refine the connections between one's research and one's teaching toward their common denominators. Certain kinds of excess are pared away, and what remains is a focus—ranging from the simple to the very complex—on how literary texts *work.* Recently, teaching literary language has brought into sharper focus the nature of the scholarship I have been doing for the last decade: all of my work has been an effort to recuperate the uses of rhetorical criticism for queer theory, but only now, in retrospect, have I come to define that overarching project as "queer formalism." The articles and chapters I have produced since 1995—on Hawthorne, Whitman, classic American cinema, but mostly on Henry James—have sought to locate the suspensions and incoherences of gender- and sexual-identities in the problematics of formal elements, particularly trope. (I have become, as Natasha Hurley pointed out at the ACCUTE conference in Halifax, the Queen of Catachresis.) If queer formalism traces the textual itinerary of the catalogue of tropes—metaphor, synecdoche, simile, prosopopoeia, aposiopesis—to their origin or culmination in catachresis (and from there, often, to allegory), and in so doing restrains the queer-political project to what strict anti-formalists call the "merely" literary, then it also recalls deconstruction from its dead-end toward something that, while not constituting referentiality, approaches meaningful register. (In its own field, trauma theory performs something similar.) It is driven by an engagement with paradox that folds into chiasmus, that is, with an absence that bespeaks presence, and vice-versa.

Queer theory's *rapprochement* with formalism—which inescapably hovers around the more general queerness that is implicit in formalism's work—is an index of what is left of English Studies: and here I mean "left" not primarily in the sense of the political left, but rather in the sense, albeit related, of what is residual, what remains of fundamental value and interest. Another and more general term for it might be "really reading." Three years ago in *PMLA*'s Special Millennium Issue, Ellis Hanson defined queer theory

tout court as "the deconstruction of sexual rhetoric … that figures the very incoherence, artificiality, and slipperiness of language itself" (2072). At the 2002 winter conference of the American Literature Association, he argued that queer theory is really not fundamentally about sex; it's about *style:* literary, pedagogical, performative. In the pages of this Readers' Forum in *English Studies in Canada,* Steven Bruhm advocates with admirable prescience that "we deploy the hermeneutics that queer theory refined, hermeneutics that are suspicious of political programs and platitudes based on identity. And that suspicion might be applied most usefully to the idea of textuality itself, to that idea of text as always and only a battleground of ideologies" (31). Bruhm astutely recalls literary people to literature without retreating from a political self-critique—the easy and potentially self-flattering liberalism that constitutes the left of English Studies—that he understands, correctly, as urgent. I confess that I wish to go even further, and to have done with the self-perpetuating circularity of raceclassgender except—and this is a vital exception—insofar as such questions arise from the specific complexities of textual engagement, of really reading. Let me be clear, if only in paralipsis: I do not intend this statement as axiomatic or prescriptive, and I offer no disrespect to people's political imperatives. Nor do I believe that students should encounter only one mode of textual interrogation. However, I do invite the fainthearted formalists to overcome their embarrassment and institutional abjection.

Queer formalism, then, is its own restraining order.

Queer formalism, then, is its own restraining order. Operating under the regimen of a certain restraint, and an explicit focalization on textuality, it may be said to order, to bring to coherence, a certain formal restraint. Yet this restraint is riffled with ironies, and indeed points to an overarching irony of inestimable value. First, the orderly, systematic, and systemic practices of close reading—we used to call it "analysis"—do not, and should not, determine a formulaic critical emplotment of order; rather, they should revel in the contradictions and speaking silences of disorder and collapse. Secondly, this liberal mode of textual approach, and its enlistment in the service of liberal politics, requires a conservative pedagogy. By this I mean, a pedagogy of continual demonstration, in the "first me, then you" orderly sequence. I mean something *other* than the noxious liberal pedagogy of ungrammatical journal-keeping, confessional soul-baring, weeping and hand-wringing, judgement and shaming, accusation and blaming, invitations to feeling, invitations to impressionistic skipping, directives to understand that *this* book is oppressive to women-gays-lesbians-people-of-colour-working-class-people, and therefore should be firmly closed and never thought about, ever again: something other than the kind of pedagogy that encourages graduate students to insult

visiting speakers by saying such things—apropros perhaps of "Lycidas"—"so you've neglected race, but what about class?" For Eve Sedgwick was right about this, as she is about most things: ignorance circulates institutionally as powerfully as knowledge; indeed, it is a form of knowledge, reducible to the automatic "we-know-what-that-means."

What might this "something other"—this "something" that might operate as a powerful antidote to ignorance—look like? Alice Kaplan writes in her memoir, *French Lessons,* that "*explication de texte* gets more precious to me as I grow older with literature. I don't think it works the same way in English because Americans don't have the institution of *explication de texte,* the history and sense of ritual that gives the activity its charm and power. In French class we bend over the language, we caress it and we question it, and we come to understand" (211). To consider the progress in the accumulated clauses of Kaplan's final sentence is to grasp not only her commitment to the tactile and sensuous pleasures of language, or merely that understanding arises only from the complex beauty of words, but also that a pedagogical "ritual" is sustained by cool detachment, by a predictable order, by calm restraint. Informed by a long tradition, Kaplan's pedagogical ritual invokes reading as *vocation;* if her connotative images suggest the austerity of quasi-religious practices, they do not constrain students to submit passively, for it is, after all, "we" who bend over, caress, question, and come to understand. Nor, in an intellectual tradition that is so sensitive to the nuances of language, is this ritual without political engagement: as one student remarked to Kaplan after encountering an article by Franz Fanon about the changes in Algerian women during the revolution, "'Nous nous sommes dévoilés'—'we took off our veils.' A reflexive, collective verb" (211). It seems, then, that the most valuable and hard-won political lessons accrue from a patient attentiveness, that the verb "to rise above" is dependent upon a prior submission, a "bending over" the text that requires the posture of close reading. Kaplan's pedagogy will strike some readers as conservative in ways that are congruent with the nostalgia of American francophilia—the longing, in a restless culture, for more stable social practices—but her story suggests that remarkable things can happen when the text is actually open in the classroom, when reading proceeds slowly and methodologically and deliberately.

Kaplan is right, sadly, that the "institution of *explication de texte*" is largely absent from English Studies. It has to do, of course, with the pedagogical difficulty of defamiliarizing a language in which the students understand themselves as fluent. The pragmatics of linguistic "understanding" permit a ritual of close reading in second-language education, whereas a rather different set of pragmatics—the discourses of cutting to the chase and of getting

to the kernel of political meaning—often makes native speakers of English bored and irritable when they are asked to slow down. But this absence is driven also by a particular institutional history: the abjection for the last twenty-five years of the cultural baggage associated with the New Criticism, and for the last decade, a discomfort with the tyranny of text-based theory, for which hard-line deconstruction has served as a virtual synonym. In the last couple of years, perhaps in keeping with the more generally conservative tenor of our times, the legacy of the New Criticism has returned but in a bifurcated way. On the one hand, there are the new formalisms, determined to restore something approaching Kaplan's beloved rituals of close reading; on the other, there is the rise of ethical criticism which, antithetical to formalist engagements, seems at times to recycle New Critical humanism but in an extra-textual way, and thus to provide a means of updating the decidedly stale political pieties that, along with the broad interdisciplinary pressures coming from university administrations, have been the undoing of English Studies' disciplinary formation in the last decade.

This bifurcation is as unproductive as it is unnecessary. As the editors of *What's Left of Theory*—the recent offering from the English Institute that sparked the topic of this Readers' Forum—insist, "If some of those who turn against theory [a term that they situate as 'a shorthand for a certain operation of formalism' (viii)] in the name of politics do so by laying claim to referentiality and thematic criticism, then some of those who turn against politics in the name of theory do so by sacrilizing the suspension of all reference to context. Both are projects of purity which do not recognize their fundamental dependence on the other" (x). However, to recognize the disciplinary divide in this way is also to underwrite it, particularly since the editors continue to regard formalism as suspect, and therefore somewhat embarrassing: "are we, as a profession, ghosted by a formalism that never was?" (xii), they ask. Implicitly, they require that formalists be self-conscious about what we practice to a degree, attended by humility, that is never required of the more intensely politically committed.

It isn't surprising, then, that, the defenders of rigorous close reading at very different academic moments have struck the note of the apologetic, in both senses of the word. It is worth having a look at Murray Kreiger's 1981 essay, "Apology for Poetics," in this historical light. In negotiating between the parameters of New Criticism and Post-Structuralism, Kreiger wants to convince us that something vitally important is lost if we refuse to countenance any difference between the rules of language and the operations of poetics. Regarding the poem as motivated by an impossible desire for coherence, he suggests that readers "cultivate the moment of identity, the realm of metaphor,

within an aesthetic frame that acknowledges its character as momentary construct and thereby its frailty as illusion. But it allows us a glimpse of our own capacity for vision before the bifurcations of language have struck" (100). Kreiger's New-Critical nostalgia unfolded in full knowledge of, and respect for, the Derridean revolution, and with the dubious benefits of hindsight, we are now inclined to lump both sides of his negotiation together under the abjected category of disengaged formalism. Still, as W. J. T. Mitchell points out in a much more recent intervention on behalf of the commitment to form, the pleasures of form are hardly superseded modes of engagement for readers common and uncommon. "Literary scholars have, in the half century since the New Criticism was dominant," he argues, "thought of themselves as moving beyond formalism into more capacious arenas like history, culture, and politics. [But] I think most people will recognize that the contrary story could be told as well, the one in which formalism keeps returning, along with other repressed notions, like imagination and beauty and spirit" (323).

Following Adorno's acerbic 1962 essay on "Commitment," Mitchell ponders the question of why so many scholarly writers "feel that to advance professionally, they must display a progressive political heart on their sleeves and repeat mantras about 'resistance,' 'transgression,' and 'emancipation.'" Regarding these advocates as uncannily aligned with "the reactionaries who espouse high-minded commitments to 'family values,' 'real quality,' and 'humanity,'" he suggests that one's irritation with the repetition of tired progressive slogans is in direct proportion to one's solidarity with the values they express, for "we want our progressive friends and allies to be better than that" (322). At bottom, he suggests, the academic divide arises from commitment's justification in the realm of ends, while the traditional disciplinary focus on literary form "seems at best to belong to the merely instrumental sphere of means," which is precisely why the phrase "a commitment to form" seems paradoxical, misguided, nonsensical. If Mitchell repeats the lamentations over the terrible impasse that we have already seen, in varying forms, in the writing of the editors of *What's Left of Theory* and Murray Kreiger, he goes further toward a perceptive *rapprochement;* moreover, he does so without participating in the wasting embarrassments that invest the discipline of really reading. Quite simply, he inverts the received and current hierarchy of ends over means. Keeping in mind that both political and formal commitments address "systems of relations" (323), Mitchell defines the "means" of reading as the work of the literary work: "work itself (as the working, the job or labor, of the artist) is a formal process that may have to proceed [as] a going on when the end is not in sight. That it is why it has some chance … of being dialectical—that is, of activating thought as opposed to merely telling us what

we want to hear" (322). Ultimately for Mitchell, formalism insists "on paying attention to a way of being in the path rather than to where the path leads," and as such, it remains axiomatic in "any notion of right action" (324).

The signs of a return to formalism are everywhere.

The signs of a return to formalism are everywhere: the overflowing lecture halls at conference panels devoted to interrogating the meaning and function of formalism at the turn of our century; the hot new classroom text from Duke University Press, Frank Lentricchia's and Andrew DuBois' *Close Reading: The Reader.* So far, the conceptual and methodological discourses tend to be pluralistic, seeking to articulate a diversity of formalisms. My own attempts to demonstrate the workings of "queer formalism" are, I hope, an analogous intervention that reinstalls rhetorical criticism for the vexed and recently short-circuited queer-theoretical project. Mitchell's insistence on "paying attention" to the labour of the text is timely because it is charming in the manner of Alice Kaplan's beloved *explication de texte;* avoiding the rants of the jeremiad, so endemic in conservative discourse, it functions like a recall that arrives in the mail. In his sense—his sensible sense—of the fundamental means of the literary, Mitchell not only dismantles any useful opposition between liberal and conservative academic positions: he proffers a radical discipline, in relation to which *this* restraining order is an echo, a supplement, a meditation on this country, this morning.

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