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How Do Disciplines Die?

The Hakone region has aerial cable cars traversing the mountains, boiling hot springs, and lake cruises. . . . The most worthwhile attraction in the area is the MOA Art Museum, named after its founder, Mokichi Okada. While establishing one of Japan's new religions, the Church of Messianity, Okada was able to collect more than 3,000 works of art. . . . Located on a hill above the station and set in a garden full of old plum trees and azaleas, the museum also offers a sweeping view over Atami and the bay. *Admission: ¥1,500. Open 9:30–3:30; closed Thurs. Fodor's 91: Japan*

The projector, which was fitted with inadequate bulbs, threw faint images on to an over-large screen, and the lecturer, however closely he peered, could hardly discern their outlines, while for the public they were scarcely distinguishable from the damp stains on the walls. . . . To this mixture of moth-eaten ghosts and restless infants the lecturer was privileged—as the supreme reward for so much effort, care and hard work—to reveal his precious store of memories, which were permanently affected by the chill of the occasion, and which, as he spoke in the semi-darkness, he felt slipping away from him and falling one by one like pebbles to the bottom of a well.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

I ARRIVED at Narita airport, late in August of 1991, not knowing what to expect. Several hundred comparatists from around the world were assembling for the triennial meeting of the International Comparative Literature Association; this would be the group's first meeting in Asia. My uncertainty had partly to do with the conference's theme, if it had one; "The Force of Vision" was a pretty vague topic, though I'd certainly seen vaguer. My chief concern was with my fellow panelists. I knew none of them well, their work only a little better. As I waited for the airport train into the city, still groggy

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from a fourteen-hour flight, I wondered about the rationale for our having been lumped together on a panel entitled “Disciplinary Perspectives.” Or were we the panel on “Perspectives on Disciplinarity?” Setting my suitcase down, I pulled the program out of my briefcase: there we were to be, two days hence, at nine o’clock on Saturday morning, in a session whose French title in our bilingual program, “Quelques perspectives disciplinaires,” sounded almost apologetic to my ear. Who would have the energy to come? What would we have to say even if someone did show up? Here I was, prepared to talk about changes in children’s literature, and the disturbing implications of those changes for future enrollments in English courses, while an independent scholar I barely knew, Vic Addams, was doing something on the discipline of Classics at the turn of the century, and Marsha Doddvic, a film theorist from Bennington, was going to discuss recent developments in feminist criticism. The Israeli semiotician Dov Midrash, of all people, would be a commentator on our papers, none of which, so far as I knew, he had yet seen.

Roland Barthes would probably have seen this concatenation as some Zen exercise in semiotic emptiness, but it looked to me like garden-variety disorganization, so typical of the pseudo-collaboration found in conferences when neither the organizers nor the participants are prepared to work together in any meaningful sense. Faced with hundreds of paper proposals from comparatists in dozens of countries, the conference’s “organizers” had apparently resorted to some obscure stochastic principles in assembling the panels. Clearly, it would be a real challenge to the four of us to make something coherent of our manifestly unrelated disciplinary perspectives.

From what I knew of my fellow panelists’ work, I wasn’t optimistic. I had met and liked Marsha when we were both graduate students, and she’d come to a student conference I’d organized at Yale. At the time, her lively and open personality had seemed to contrast sharply with the dense theoretical prose of her dissertation on fetishism in the films of Buster Keaton. I’d never quite managed to understand her arguments, and I certainly didn’t like the look of “scopophilia,” for which Marsha was condemning—or perhaps praising—Keaton. Even granting that my problem lay in the gap be-

tween my capacities and Marsha's greater brilliance, I wondered just how we'd communicate to a common audience or even to each other. Still, those were old impressions, as we'd been out of touch for years, and I was curious to see how her thoughts had evolved in the meanwhile.

I have to admit that I was less eager to renew my acquaintance with Vic Addams, almost for opposite reasons. I loved his work—the impressive ease with which he could move from Sanskrit aesthetics to medieval mysticism to Aztec poetry; the resolutely untrendy aestheticism of his recent book, *The Utility of Futility*—yet I'd always found myself a little put off by Vic in person. Was it a certain superciliousness in his manner, or was I just envious of Vic's superbly tailored wardrobe, his places on the Vineyard and in Venice, his evident enjoyment of both the financial resources and the sparkling prose style that enabled him to spend his holidays doing articles for *Yachting Today*?

Most of all, I was apprehensive regarding the formidable Dov Midrash, whom I would be meeting for the first time. Readers of *Diacritics* may recall the controversy that swirled around Dov's major work of the mid-eighties, *Narrheit und Methode* ("Folly and Method")—an ambiguously ironic reconstruction of deconstruction that maintained that deconstructive insights are most profound precisely when they approach a state of pure self-parody. A wholesale attack on the book by E. D. Hirsch under the title "Darkness Risible" had only increased the book's cachet among those in the know. In a review essay in *Glyph*, the Turkish scholar Hymit Bathtöi had observed that even as Hirsch denounced Midrash's conclusions, he had grudgingly granted Midrash's major points, admitting the basic instability of poetic expression and the ultimate unknowability of an author's original intention. Bathtöi concluded that Hirsch's supposed attack was actually a covert defense of Midrash's position, promoting the very views it pretended to dismiss. Bathtöi went so far as to speculate that "Midrash" might be a pen-name for Hirsch himself, a charge which Hirsch indignantly rejected but which Midrash himself refused either to confirm or deny.

For my part, after reading several attacks and defenses, I only knew that I would never be enough in the know to know what Midrash was really

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talking about. And now the instigator of all this debate was going to be our respondent. Would we have to spend our time decoding Midrash's response, trying to figure out whether he was complimenting us or mocking us?

Actually meeting Midrash proved to be a relief. I found a message from him awaiting me when I arrived at my hotel, proposing that the four of us copanelists meet for breakfast the next morning at a nearby coffee shop. Dov and I were the first ones there; his stocky, bearded form stood out, the rest of the patrons being Japanese. Apparently the travelers in the surrounding hotels weren't venturing out so early, or if they did they may have been put off by the restaurant's English name—Snack Memory—and gone in search of more authentic cuisine. In fact, though, Snack Memory served standard Japanese fare to a clientele of office workers, and Dov and I settled down to a meal of miso soup and raw egg over rice. He proved to be a fascinating conversationalist, though at times he was a little hard to follow, speaking in low, gravelly tones punctuated by self-mocking interjections. He spoke English not so much with a pronounced accent as with underlying speech rhythms that reflected several different languages. As I later learned, he'd grown up speaking Russian with his father, Yiddish with his mother, and Hebrew in school, then had lectured in German for ten years at Konstanz, before assuming his new posts first at Geneva and now at Irvine as well. He had a keen ear for American colloquialisms, and at times he almost sounded American; then you'd get a glimpse of one or another linguistic layer beneath his command of English.

"Glad to meet you," Dov said. "This fucking architecture." He gestured at the bland office buildings outside, an unfiltered cigarette in his hand. "You see what happens when a culture gives up its own traditions? Food, no, thank God: here, we have a good breakfast." He used his chopsticks to stir his egg into his rice.

I could see that small talk was not going to be Midrash's strong suit. I decided to respond in kind. "But what are Japan's 'own' traditions?" I asked. "Do you mean the script they borrowed from China, or the metaphysics that came from India through Korea?"

Dov smiled. “Maybe you are right, it is just a matter of time. The import needs to put down roots, be corrupted or purified in local terms, so in five hundred years they will build remarkable skyscrapers here. We should maybe come back then and see.”

I was about to point out the difficulty of doing so, when Marsha walked in. When I’d known her in her Berkeley days, we’d all been at the stage of androgynous jeans and tangled hair; now, though the hour was early, Marsha was wearing a suit, its black leather contrasting effectively with her pale skin and with the bright red of her nails.

“Don’t you just love it here?” she asked, after I’d introduced her to Dov. “The energy, the electronic readouts in the subway cars, all that neon in overdrive around the train station!” She gestured toward the bustling boulevard outside. “Don’t you think they do Paris better here than we do in America?”

Dov just shrugged. I decided to change the subject, and asked Marsha how she’d been in the last few years.

“Great!” she replied. “The Bennington students are a trip, and the department’s a really collegial bunch. It’s hard to get much writing done, but the whole atmosphere is wonderful, artsy, off-beat, intense, and they’re putting me up for tenure in the fall. Everyone says it’s a sure thing.”

“So they have something so definite as tenure at Bennington?” Dov asked. “I thought they refused to play the usual academic games there.”

“It isn’t called tenure, that’s true,” Marsha replied; “it’s kind of a point of pride in the campus culture to stay away from any hierarchy of power. So we have a permanent renewal of contract instead of tenure.”

“It sounds like it’s just the same thing under a new name,” I remarked.

“Names matter,” Marsha replied. “A symbolic change can have a ripple effect in reality—otherwise, all of us in literature might as well shut up shop. The proof comes in the performance. At Bennington, refusing the ordinary language of academic authority is a way we express an institutional reality. The power isn’t held tight by our senior faculty at all—I chaired the department last year myself, even before the vote this spring. Of course, my case still has to go through the Trustees, times are tough, enrollment’s been

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sagging some, but no one expects any problem. The administration has a long tradition of close consultation with the faculty, we've got a dynamic new president—a woman, no less—and she's sure to strengthen our collaborative culture. She wants us to have campus-wide discussions this coming year about the future of the institution. All in all, we're expecting good times ahead. If only I wasn't feeling torn in two so much of the time."

"What's going wrong?" I asked, alarmed.

"Nothing's wrong at all," Marsha replied. "Just too much good fortune all at once. Especially the arrival of Cassie, our daughter, she's thirteen months now. She's so wonderful! And *so* engrossing—I just don't know how I'm going to juggle everything when classes start back up next month. Last year I had a half-time deal, that helped a lot, but we can't really afford it this coming year. Anyway, I'm impatient to get back into things full-time, what with the promotion and everything. At least she stopped breast-feeding a couple of months ago, but even so—if only I had an 'insert paragraph' command in my life!"

"Is there a husband in the picture?" Dov asked. "Does he help?"

"You're damn right he does," Marsha replied, then paused. "I guess that came out sounding a little. . . . But I didn't really mean it that way. And he isn't exactly a husband, either, as far as that goes. Still, we've been together quite a while now, and we both wanted a child. Tom adores Cassie—he even *thinks* he does an equal share of all the work. I've never had to get up at night with her, which helps because I sleep like a rock. When I was nursing, we had this deal at night, I'd provide the food, he'd provide the transportation. But daytimes, I don't know, Tom can be kind of slow on the uptake, and half the time he's out in his greenhouses, or holed up in the study doing some gardening column on a tight deadline. A week can go by, and I've barely read a page. And as for writing. . . ."

Marsha's voice trailed off. She shook herself, and continued more positively.

"At least I feel I've earned this break. Ten days! I have to say, it's kind of nice to be footloose for a change."

Just then, a voice called out from the doorway:

“*David*, my dear, there you are!” Vic Addams never simply entered a room when he could make an entrance. Bending his head gracefully to avoid a hanging lantern, he came to our table, and draped his slender form onto a chair. Without waiting for introductions, he took a tourist brochure out of the pocket of his linen blazer.

“Do you see this?” he asked. We all looked: an ordinary promotional photo, showing the Tokyo skyline as seen from the bay.

“Look!” Vic said. “They’re windsurfing out there, Mistral sails no less, right in front of the skyscrapers. Sublime! And think of the housing here—do you know what that means?”

“No, what?” I asked.

“Rentals! How many Tokyo apartments could have space for a board, not to mention the mast? My concierge informs me that the hot spot is a beach out at Tsudanuma, part way round the bay, where well-endowed young fellows rent well-equipped sailboards. Who’s coming with me? I’ve hired a car for the day; my driver can run you by your hotels for your suits, and we’re off.”

“I thought we have a conference starting today,” Dov said. “And our own panel comes tomorrow morning. I think we must plan it out, and I need to know what you will say so I can prepare my response.”

Marsha and I spoke at the same time. “Dov’s right,” I said. “Let’s go,” said Marsha. “I’ve never been windsurfing.”

“About the talk,” Vic said to Dov. “I plan to extemporize; you can just disagree with whatever I say. People usually do.”

“Here’s my paper,” Marsha said, handing Dov a folder. “All the panels today are pretty traditional source-and-influence things, so I think I’ll get more out of some immersion in the culture.”

“Immersion? Only if you’re careless,” Vic said. “The idea is *not* to fall in. But I’ll show you.”

I SPENT the next several hours in conference sessions. Marsha had been all too correct: a dutiful exposition of someone’s influence on someone else, followed by a paper on the second someone’s subsequent influence on

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some third someone, both presented by speakers who seemed to see life steadily, and see it in little pieces; a panel on that old chestnut, Ezra Pound's misunderstanding of Chinese script, the failure of all previous critics ever to say anything really interesting on this topic having inspired a new crop of earnest failures; and a depressing smattering of broader methodological papers, some presented by feel-good global-villagers who saw vague harmonies everywhere, the rest given by crypto-nationalists who emphasized the incommensurability of East and West and the implicit superiority of their own cultural system—unless, with an oppositional flourish, they demonstrated the superiority of any culture but their own.

None of the panels I attended had any internal coherence, except for the Pound panel, which had no variety; none of the conference rooms had any windows; none of the panels left more than five minutes for questions; none of the questions was audible; none of the replies was intelligible. Even so, I couldn't decide: were Vic and Marsha showing the only real sanity in the place by going off windsurfing, or was their escape act just another symptom of the problem?

As I emerged wearily from my third panel, I decided to find out. I walked up the street to get my bathing suit from my hotel. No concierge there, and the single desk clerk was absorbed in his comic-book novel, so I hailed a cab on the street. The driver spoke no English, and I had forgotten the name of the beach. Though I'd made an effort to learn some basic phrases, I hadn't thought to master any vocabulary concerning beaches and sailboards. After two or three minutes of fruitless non-communication, I let the cab go. Then it occurred to me that I might be able to pantomime my wishes, so I hailed another cab. Motioning for the driver to open his window, I made broad breast-strokes with my arms, pronouncing the words "swim, swim" and "beach, beach" slowly and distinctly.

The driver looked at me quizzically over the rims of his sunglasses. "You wish to go to a beach, sir?" he asked. "Would that be Tsudanuma?"

I got in, ignoring the looks of the passersby who had stopped to observe my performance. On the way, the driver taught me the Japanese term for windsurfing, which proved to be "windsurfering."

The beach was a broad arc of sand, bounded by a breakwater on the right and, on the left, a partially completed highway overpass surrounded by half a dozen construction cranes. I scanned the horizon for my friends. Japanese adolescents in Day-Glo bodysuits were zipping back and forth across the water, from the breakwater to the construction site and back, but Marsha and Vic were not among them. Probably they had left some time ago, I reflected; it was almost five o'clock by now. Then I saw them down the beach near the rental shed, their boards drawn up on the sand beside them. It seemed that they had forgotten to bring towels; Vic was drying Marsha's back with a tee shirt. Wearing only a skimpy black bathing suit, Vic somehow gave a more powerful impression than when clothed. His muscles had the fine but not bulky tone of runners and—as I could see, looking around—of windsurfing enthusiasts. His dark hair, neatly brushed as always back from his finely chiseled forehead, glistened in the late-afternoon sunlight.

I almost hesitated to disturb them, but as Marsha turned her head over her shoulder to say something to Vic, she caught sight of me, and waved cordially.

"It's been great!" she said, as I came up. "I only fell in a few times—I *hope* there isn't anything too toxic in the water around here. And I've even learned to tack!"

"A natural," Vic said approvingly. "Most people take far longer to get started. Care to take a turn, David?"

I contented myself with a swim, then joined the others at a beachfront snack bar where they were eating bowls of noodles.

"And now, what next?" Vic asked. "A stroll through some exquisite garden before we take in the play?"

"I'm afraid I missed my chance on that one," I said regretfully. "I didn't focus on it in the preregistration materials, and now I hear it's all sold out."

"So what?" Marsha asked. "My attitude's always been, these big corporate-sponsored events, I'll save my money for worthier causes."

"But Marsha, dear heart," Vic exclaimed, "this is not to be missed! *Hamlet* revised into Kabuki form, now being re-staged in a full-scale reproduction

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of the Globe theater?—To say nothing of the pleasures of the company,” he added, with a smile that somehow seemed directed only at her.

“Oh, I’m going,” Marsha replied. “I just don’t plan to add to the take. They’ve already sold the seats anyway, but there’s bound to be no-shows. You come too, David, I’ll get us both in.”

I found this hard to believe, given the precision with which everything seemed to be organized in Tokyo. Still, I had no other plans, and so I went along in Vic’s car. We arrived at the Globe theater, somewhat incongruously set in a quiet residential neighborhood of single-story houses nestled among cherry trees and ornamental shrubbery. There was still some time until the show was to begin, so Marsha had us take a stroll.

“The trick’s in the timing,” she said conspiratorially, as we returned to the theater. “We waltz in thirty seconds before curtain time. You do have a ticket, right, Vic? Give it here—just follow me.”

We went in behind Marsha as she strode purposefully into the crowd of last-minute arrivals, who parted before us. When we reached the ticket-taker, Marsha brandished Vic’s ticket, tapping it significantly on her watch on her other wrist. She then pointed at Vic and me with the ticket as she held up three fingers of her other hand, smiling generously as she did so to indicate that we would spare the attendant the need to hold things up on our account.

The ticket-taker hesitated for half a second; it was enough. Marsha swept us in with her, as new people engaged the attendant’s attention. Marsha cordially waved an usher away, and we settled into a half-empty row of seats.

“Do you think the ticket-taker really thought she saw three tickets?” I whispered.

“Are you kidding?” Marsha answered. “She thinks she *took* our tickets and gave us back the stubs! Stick with me, kiddo, and you’ll do okay.”

This was a side of Marsha I hadn’t known about. Happily, no one came to demand our seats and have us ejected from the theater, and I gradually began to relax and enjoy the play. An unusual version of *Hamlet* indeed, written at the turn of the century by an early comparatist who hoped to reconcile East and West through creative dramaturgy. I had some difficulty

following the action, partly because no translation was available, but also because the same actor played both Hamlet and Ophelia. Still, the play reached a forceful climax when Hamlet committed ritual suicide by ordering Horatio to cut off his head. I found myself moved by the solemn final scene, in which the new ruler, Fortinbras, set the severed head on a shrine in honor of Hamlet's dead father. Was the director making a subtle point, or simply saving costs, by having Fortinbras too be played by Hamlet-Ophelia?

As we left the theater, Vic proposed going out for sake. Jet-lagged, I declined. Tired though I was, I noticed that neither of my companions urged me a second time. Returning alone to my modest business hotel—a far cry from the Frank Lloyd Wright–designed Hilton where Vic was staying—I called my wife and children back in New York, now starting their day as I was ending mine. I then looked around my room. I could almost touch both side walls at once, and the room extended only a yard or so beyond the end of the narrow bed. Still, ingenious cabinets, trimmed in mahogany, ran under the bed to hold clothes, and compartments in the paneled end wall opened magically to reveal TV, VCR, CD player, and mini-bar. Perhaps under Vic's influence, I found myself thinking of my surroundings not as a budget single room but as sleeping quarters on a trim cruising yawl. Through my small, porthole-like window, I could see the stream of traffic eddying along the road below. It could be all right, exploring this new culture with my new friends, always assuming they could spare some time for me. But did we have enough in common ever to get beyond the transient intimacy of a conference trip? Could the conference itself provide a substantive counterpoint to our extracurricular activities?

I WAS still wondering about this the next morning, when I arrived for our panel a few minutes early and found only Dov in the room. He was already seated on the rostrum, scowling slightly as he jabbed at a draft (mine or Marsha's, I didn't really want to know) with a red felt-tipped pen. A handful of thrill-seekers wandered in over the next few minutes and subsided quietly into chairs. They almost disappeared from view, dotted about

in a room meant to hold a hundred, their faces suspended in that strangely garish half-light peculiar to hotel conference rooms the world over.

I joined Dov on the podium, and then we waited. Finally, at ten past nine, in came a tanned Vic and a sunburned Marsha. “Sorry we’re late,” Marsha whispered as she settled down beside me. I gave a noncommittal smile and motioned to Vic, who went to the lectern. I could see in his hand some notes jotted on a sheet of Tokyo Hilton stationery.

“How do disciplines die?” he began. “Can any historical signpost point the way for the modern literatures as they plunge, lemming-like, down the steep slope of undergraduate enrollments, as business majors boom and literature falls off the charts? I propose to you the melancholy, monitory example of Classics, queen of the disciplines a hundred years ago—hated dominatrix of the college curriculum in the students’ eyes, to be sure, but mistress of their professors’ hearts. In those distant days, the study of the classics was the great source of mental discipline and of public morality alike. Not only could you not major in English, you’d be lucky to find a single course in English literature! This was the natural order of things, had been for the longest time, and no classicist in 1875 could have foreseen how swiftly the modern rabblement would dethrone their queen. The revolution took just a decade or two, and classics has declined from half the curriculum to a tiny fraction of it now. Blame the barbarism natural to American culture if you like, or take the classicists themselves to task for circling their wagons, for their defensive reliance on the greatness that was Greece and the glory that was philology. Yet know that the writing is on our own walls today, its message conveyed by the very fact that scarcely a soul in this room can read the Greek in which it is written!”

Rather melodramatic, I thought; still, he had gotten the audience’s attention. Vic went on, leaning forward on the lectern, speaking more quietly now.

“I would not have you think I am here to mock Classics or even most classicists. If the signpost pointed only downward, what point would there be in pausing to decipher it? It took the classicists a long while to regroup, but regroup they have, and we should attend to the examples they are set-

ting by their innovative efforts at outreach. They are far ahead of most modern disciplines in developing lively new grammars, interactive databases, links to high schools—not shrinking even from recourse to billboards and toga parties: methods not to be despised! There are lessons for us all in their current recovery; and there is a positive message in the long decline itself, if we can have the courage to face it. In many ways, that tectonic upheaval at the fin-de-siècle is the best thing that ever happened to Classics. How *utterly* perverse it was, really, to enthrone classical civilization as the embodiment of nineteenth-century European values, once technology began to triumph over theology and the colleges decided to distance themselves from their sectarian roots! Bronze-Age warriors with Iron-Age values somehow magically preserving ‘sweetness and light,’ in between yesterday’s rape and tomorrow’s conquest? What would these slave-owning, pagan bisexuals have thought, if they returned to earth in 1890 and found themselves made into poster boys for the highest aspirations of a bourgeois, Victorian, Christian, homophobic, industrial capitalism? *Horribile dictu!*

“What a relief, really, for the committed classicist, to be freed today from the obligation to find sermons under every stone of the Acropolis. No need now to dress Homer and Euripides in proper Victorian garb, to fit them into patterns their limbs never knew, bending and folding them like paper dolls to serve—let’s say, in honor of our hosts today—as the fons et origami of modern culture! No wonder the older classicists let their specious centrality fade away with little regret: devotees of the modern literatures should do so too, refuse any servitude to the *pietas* of state culture, whether the middlebrow moralism of the right or the middlebrow multiculturalism of the left.”

Vic went on in this vein for several minutes more, in terms that will be sufficiently familiar from his book, especially the opening polemic on “The Futility of Utility.” He argued that only in a marginal position can literary studies do justice to literature’s paradoxical embodiment of cultural values and its dislocation of them, especially its undercutting of the cosy half-truths in which social values typically—I think he actually said “inevitably”—filter down into classroom presentations. On my right, Dov was

shaking his head and writing furiously. To my left, Marsha seemed to be restraining herself from interrupting each time Vic made a disdainful reference to popular culture or cultural studies; I thought I even saw a flush spread across her neck, though this may only have been an optical effect of fluorescent lighting on her sunburn. Vic continued:

“Classics can point the way for the modern literatures, if only because the compromises that tempt all professors in search of an audience look so ludicrous in the case of antiquity. It is a mistake to make Milton popular, but it is a mistake that some cannot resist, trying to trade in the poet’s ‘fit audience, though few’ for an unfit audience, but many. This is scarcely a good bargain, dear friends, and it is a game for which Theocritus and Anaximander make poor pawns. But do not suppose that I mean to evoke the classical writers as standard-bearers for an elite culture! Virgil may have been, Euripides most emphatically was not, but the ancients’ values, popular *or* elite, only sporadically connect to ours in any event. We should not study such writers for their closeness to us and our egotistical concerns—their value lies precisely in their *distance* from us, their foreignness. Spare me the Christian reading of Aeneas and the feminist reading of Medea alike! It is not for us to appropriate such magnificent, enigmatic characters, it is for them to appropriate us. Ezra Pound had his reasons for urging us to ‘make it new,’ though his famous phrase looks less provocative now than he meant it to be, more in tune with the demands of a growing consumer capitalism.” Vic cast a glance over at Marsha, who didn’t look amused. He raised an eyebrow ironically, and went on.

“For us today, the challenge is quite the reverse: to make it *old*. We must allow the work the freedom of its *utter* estrangement from us, setting the stage for the liberation that comes when we are taken a while out of ourselves, disabused of our pieties and our vanities. We return to our world shaken, drained perhaps—surely the point of Aristotle’s medical analogy to cathartic purgation. ‘Be old! Anew!’ as Joyce so beautifully says in *Finnegans Wake*: ‘We are once amore as babes awondering in that chill childerness which is our true name.’ A literature department must be more than a little inglenook where we sit and take the chill off our modern culture, dreaming

of a nostalgic past—or else fantasizing the radical social change our young charges will enact just as soon as they finish their term papers on Fanon and graduate. We should resist the superficial satisfactions that come from acting the part of scholarly Jack Horner, pulling little social plums out of our textual puddings. The death of literature as an institution may mean the rebirth of a more vital literary experience; as scholars and teachers, it is our task not to mourn but to celebrate the death of Tim Finnegan the solid citizen, to assist in his resurrection as a shape-shifting, larger-than-life, life force.”

Marsha leaned over to me as Vic sat down. “Mind if I go next?” she whispered. “I just can’t let all that go by.” I agreed, secretly relieved not to have to follow such a rhetorically charged performance. Marsha went to the lectern.

“What my esteemed panelist is peddling here,” she began, “is the worst sort of retrograde bullshit.”

Maybe I shouldn’t follow Marsha either, I thought; maybe I should have stayed in bed that morning.

“If *I* was independently wealthy,” Marsha continued, “I too could maybe afford to sit outside the institutional arena, making fun of the students who are looking to literature to give them some guidance in their lives, as they struggle to make sense of the racially and economically divided society around them. A society, after all, whose leaders would be quite happy to have all of us in literature confine ourselves to parsing grammar and syntax, topping our programs off with a little artistic polishing. Vic Addams may think he’s taking a stand in favor of literature’s lofty purity, but he’s either kidding himself or he’s kidding you. What he’s really doing, like it or not, is playing into the hands of the right, the people who attack any questioning of the status quo as ‘political correctness.’ The idea of basing an appeal to artistic independence on Milton and Virgil! Can you imagine two more politically engaged writers? I’m happy to spare you the Christian reading of Virgil, and you can spare *me* the Christian reading of Milton too, as far as that goes. But I can’t imagine a viable reading of Virgil that didn’t begin from his celebration of the Roman Empire, or a reading of *Paradise Lost* that

ignored Milton's despair over the collapse of the people's republic he thought Cromwell had created. Didn't he start that epic right after the restoration of the monarchy he hated so much? Doesn't that hatred fuel Satan's fury at the 'tyrant' in heaven?"

Vic was shaking his head; the corners of his mouth turned down in a fleeting smile at the words "Virgil's celebration of the Empire." On my right, Dov was writing as furiously as before. I could see a few words: "People's republic! Milton the Maoist?" Marsha went on.

"Literature deals in ideas; let's face it, it deals in ideologies. All art does, though you may not see this so clearly in the more indirect cases like music. With literature, it's as plain as the words on the page. Writers take positions in their works, and then their publishers and reviewers and readers put them into ideologically charged positions of their own. It's part of our job as critics to locate those positions, and take a stand toward them ourselves. If you want to persuade me otherwise, my dear"—Marsha turned and addressed Vic directly—"you'll have to give me some better examples than the ones you gave just now."

She turned back to the audience. "The most exciting thing in academic study today is the exploration of the social and cultural grounding of all forms of art, popular *and* elite, and part of the point is for us to clarify our own situations in the process. Let me give you a concrete case of what I mean. My example was supposed to introduce the topic I was going to present, before I was kind of derailed by Vic's presentation. I've called my talk 'Where in the World is Virginia Woolf?' The idea was to focus on Woolf to talk about the evolution of our discipline. If all politics is local, it's because it's localized in time as well as in place. The politics I want to reflect on is ours more than Woolf's, or rather, it's the way we keep reconfiguring Woolf's politics, and how our reconfigurings can give an index to our own shifting situations."

Marsha paused and put on the pair of purple-rimmed glasses that had been hanging on a cord around her neck. About to begin reading, she set her pages down and continued speaking directly to the audience, now with a hint of apology in her voice.

“I really don’t object to aestheticism itself—who could fall in love with Woolf and not feel its attraction? When we read her, we get seduced by that dreamy language, that rolling swell of sentences with their whitecaps of semicolons. We do get caught up into her world, I’ll grant Vic that. But I want us to remember that Woolf always attached her webs of words to the real world—‘with bands of steel,’ as she put it in *A Room of One’s Own*. The detached aestheticism that Vic’s proposing might be possible, who knows; it’s just that in actual fact, that kind of ‘detachment’ has usually turned out to serve the politics of the status quo. Woolf is my example of this; again, I’m not talking about her own position, but about the politics her aestheticism was yoked up with until quite recently.”

Marsha cast a look over at Vic, who seemed to be listening with interest, an impression not everyone could create while also using a bent paper clip to dislodge sand from beneath his fingernails. Marsha glanced at her own fingernails, and continued:

“But let me give you some of the actual talk you crossed all those time zones to hear.” She picked up her papers, set a couple of pages aside, and began to read. “I’m sure that many people have become feminists by reading Woolf. Not me: what did the trick was reading the *article* on Woolf in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. This was in the late seventies, when I was a junior in college at Minnesota. I’d started doing a lot of literary theory, which meant structuralism, Freud, even some Lacan already—Minnesota was a pretty hip place—but feminism just wasn’t on the map. This was still the Lacan of fathers and phalluses, ‘Dads and Dongs,’ as we called the course. And in my literature classes, you barely ever read a woman writer, and never, ever did you read her *as* a woman.

“That’s just the way it was, and I wasn’t the twenty-year-old who’d be savvy enough to see the problem on her own. It took the encyclopedia to teach me. I was trying one day to remember the dates of one of Henry James’s late novels and one of Woolf’s early ones—I was wondering if she could have read *The Golden Bowl*, I think it was, before she wrote some scene in *The Voyage Out*. So I checked into the *Britannica* in the reading room. This was when they’d just come out with their division into two sets of

volumes: the ‘Micropaedia,’ for short entries, and the ‘Macropaedia,’ for the really major stuff.

“You can probably guess where this is heading, but believe me, I didn’t have a clue in 1977; after I found James in the *Macro*, right where he should be, I innocently looked for Woolf there too. Nothing doing. But the real shock came when I tracked her down in the *Micro*. It wasn’t just that Henry had *nine times* the column inches Virginia had: it was what those inches said. Everything in Henry’s entry was about ‘mastery’—I think they used that word about six times, all about his impact on the history of the novel, his cross-cultural insights, his elegant, ornate prose—the whole number. But Virginia? Weakness, insecurity, madness that her loving husband couldn’t control; despair and suicide at the end, after which loving Leonard published her final novel for her. And her writing? Technical experiments with stream of consciousness, in between those bouts of madness. Every damn paragraph in Henry’s article made you feel like an incomplete human being if you didn’t go out and read six of his novels right away. Not one line in Virginia’s entry would make you think you really needed to read her at all. Ever.

“I got mad, and I started looking around. I got myself over to the French department, and I got into film studies. In both places, a couple of untenured people were starting to teach things that could channel my anger and help me go somewhere with it. There was even a Marxist in Philosophy, though he was fired not long after that, and I started putting things together.”

Marsha glanced at her watch. “I see I’m already running out of time. I was going to use this little story to set up a discussion of stages in postwar feminist criticism. As you can see, because of my age and the accident of where I was, I kind of missed the classic sixties and early seventies feminism that was working to redress the balance between Virginia and Henry. I went right into the high theory mode of late-seventies feminism, and that kept me busy for a good ten years. I was planning to go on to say something about the new stage we’ve entered now: less abstract and abstruse, more activist and angry—*Three Guineas* as our new model Woolf text, not *A Room*

of One's Own. As my time's about up, though, I think it's just as well if I keep the focus on Virginia and Henry's adventures in the *Encyclopaedia Patriarchica*. The sixties generation began to set that balance right, and that work still needs doing today. It's no denigration of the beauty that Vic and I would both find in Woolf to say that the old stress on her style-for-style's-sake was one way of keeping her out of the Macropaedia."

Marsha looked over at Vic, who put a hand over his heart and shook his head, as if to assure her that he was certainly not trying to exclude Woolf himself. Marsha gave an impatient shake of her head and addressed him directly, apparently forgetting the audience in front of her.

"Look," she said, "the old high aesthetic line just isn't wearing too well these days, not even for James. He and Woolf are together at last in the latest edition of the *Britannica*, but not because we've gotten Virginia promoted to the Macro. No such luck! Poor Henry's been *demoted* to the Micro. Of course, he *still* has three times the space Virginia does, at least for now, but we're going to have to find more compelling ways to present all our favorite authors before they disappear altogether."

Marsha looked around, apparently remembering that she was standing at a lecturn; she resumed speaking to the audience. "To read Woolf *or* James today, we need to do more than pile up more close readings of their novels, whether they're the earlier celebrations of *Mrs. Dalloway* or the more recent unpackings of deferrals and gaps in *Orlando* and *The Golden Bowl*. We need to read our authors themselves as social texts, with all the messiness that entails. Vic Addams is welcome to his catharses and his purifications, but if we leave Woolf floating in some exquisite stratosphere, she's useless to us here and now. The Woolf who struggled to make her way in the world, the Woolf whose books are still struggling to make their way, is the Woolf we can take our bearings from today."

She took off her glasses and sat down to scattered applause. As she reached her seat, she glanced over at Vic, who gave her a sweet smile. Or was I interpreting his expression too optimistically? Could a sweet smile really be sweet, as a matter of fact, under the circumstances? Probably Proust could have untangled this, but Proust wouldn't have been on a

podium to begin with, needing to make his own point in the next twenty minutes. Could I find a positive way to build on both the earlier talks? This wasn't going to be easy. As I went to the lectern, I decided to pretend I knew Marsha and Vic better than I really did, hoping my assumptions wouldn't be too far off the mark.

"Vic Addams and Marsha Doddvic have more in common than you might think, and more than they may realize themselves," I began. "They were both passionate readers at an early age, and in college they gravitated toward the study of complex, demanding poets and novelists. Both also believed in the transformative role of literature, and they still believe this, though they may envision that transformation differently. Both began from a base in highly artistic works, more English and European than American. Each has broadened out from there, and yet neither really seems to have lost that early love of authors like Virgil, Milton, and Woolf. But as Marsha says, all these authors are now collectively an endangered species. Yet the problem goes beyond the issue of any given approach. I believe the real threat to literary study doesn't come from too much aestheticism, or from politicization either, but from broader changes in contemporary culture that endanger *any* study of great work from the past."

I turned to my topic proper, a discussion of the problems posed today by the changing cultural environment in which our children are now growing up. I began by citing statistics on the decline in English enrollments since the late sixties—a drop of 50 percent. "No doubt there are many causes for this decline," I went on, "from grim professionalism on the one hand to the excitement of new fields like women's studies on the other. But the cultural environment that children grow up in must be a major factor as well. Here the usual villain is television; it's often said that we've raised a TV generation that simply doesn't read.

"This claim is misguided, I think, for two reasons. First, it ignores the fact that the TV junkies of the fifties became English majors in droves in the sixties; if TV was so pernicious, we never would have had that boom to begin with. Second, the claim that kids no longer read is simply false. The problem lies exactly with *what* they read—not what they watch. The real

culprit is a development that might seem like the best possible news for literary study: the contemporary boom in children's literature. This new wave of writing threatens to squeeze earlier writing—and especially earlier British writing—out of our culture altogether.”

I looked out at my audience; no visible reaction, but at least they seemed to be listening. I continued.

“It was only in the early sixties that we began to see serious contemporary American literature being written for children and adolescents, a change that began with works like Madeleine L'Engle's Newberry-award-winning *A Wrinkle in Time*. That book, in fact, had been rejected by twenty publishers as too complex and troubling for young readers, before it was finally published in 1963. Until then, the available American choices had consisted mostly of cartoon-like works like the Hardy Boys adventures. For richer reading, kids would usually have to turn to imported British classics. From Beatrix Potter to A. A. Milne and Kenneth Grahame, then on to Dickens and Sir Walter Scott: a child was naturally led into classic British literature, given a taste for its cadences and its characters, its settings and its obsessions. Many an English major was born in this way.

“These books are still available, of course, but they no longer have the pride of place they still retained even thirty years ago, precisely because so much really good children's literature is being published in America today. My own children show more interest in the jazzy, ironic, postmodern children's books of Jon Scieszka than in any older British writer: Winnie the Pooh has been shouldered aside by the Stinky Cheese Man. Scieszka is an excellent writer: but he is likely to lead his readers forward toward Quentin Tarantino rather than back to Henry Fielding and Jane Austen. Children today have less and less need for anything written before 1960, especially for anything written outside America before 1960.

“Further,” I continued, “the current generation of writers themselves work from a newly contemporary and American frame of reference. Madeleine L'Engle's pathbreaking work would have been impossible without a broad background in older British writers like George Macdonald and C. S. Lewis; Judy Blume's work would be impossible *with* such a background.

This shift is even clearer in the lighter literary fare with which adults relax. P. G. Wodehouse's favorite subject, in his British high school in the 1890s, was Greek verse composition, and he could compose Latin hexameters as rapidly as English iambs. And Wodehouse found his first and largest audience in America. Reading even an American humorist like S. J. Perelman in midcentury was like doing verbal gymnastics, keeping your mind in shape for reading a Joyce or a Laurence Sterne. A humorist today like Dave Barry doesn't have the same effect at all. Hilarious as Barry is, his jokes, and even his prose style, point toward Jerry Seinfeld and David Letterman, not toward Swift or Nabokov."

I concluded my presentation by calling for scholars to cooperate with teachers in elementary and secondary schools, to work together to achieve a better balance in the books students are getting as they grow up. "If we don't take steps soon," I said dramatically, "we won't have any students left to aestheticize *or* to politicize in our college classrooms."

I sat down, relieved to be done; I was also rather pleased to have been able to build out from concerns expressed by both Vic and Marsha, moving things to a broader plane and away from the personal invective they'd been courting. I just hoped that Dov would use his international perspective to carry the discussion further, and not simply go on the attack against one or the other of our copanelists.

I was half right. He didn't begin by attacking them: he attacked me.

"Damrosch seems to be groping at some institutional perspective," Dov began. "This could maybe be interesting, but so far his ideas remain superficial, thanks to his wish to please everybody. I think this is the problem of American liberals generally. No blame anywhere: teachers are not taking the path of least resistance, they are only swamped with too many excellent new books. Parents are nowhere to be seen and do not need to be. The poor little children are not ignorant and lazy, they merely need to have some old books thrown at them. They can even read them while they watch their daily dose of seven hours of TV: it's okay with Damrosch, *everything* is okay with Damrosch!"

I definitely should have stayed in bed that morning.

“This is really just a marketing problem,” Dov went on, “if people used to read Wodehouse and now they read Dave Barry? I have to spend a lot of time on airplanes, and I have read this Dave Barry—the airline magazines seem to love him. This Dave Barry is a shitty writer! *That* is the problem: any society that abandons a Wodehouse for this Dave Barry is a society that is going to hell in the 747 where they read him just to forget the life they have only too briefly left behind them.”

Dov took a handkerchief and wiped his brow. He then continued, more calmly now that he had disposed of me. “What holds my interest when I read Wodehouse are two things: his many-layered style and his *values*. Yes, Wodehouse has real values, and they give a true satirical bite to his ridiculous earls and their shiftless younger sons. You find in him lasting images of friendship, loyalty, and resilience; wittingly or witlessly, his Bertie Woosters and his Gally Threepwoods puncture pomposity, undercut class pride, and explode hypocrisy. *This* is real satire. But this Dave Barry, so far as I have read him, never rises beyond farce. Everyone’s a fool, except Dave Barry himself, who only pretends to be a fool. In reality, Dave Barry means to manipulate us as much as any evil bureaucrat in his little chamber of horrors. There’s no moral purchase for a reader anywhere in his work. He lacks a vital style, he just gives a series of one-liners, as they are called, with some minimal excuse of a theme for the day. I submit to you that this Dave Barry is morally and stylistically rootless, I might say ruthless, both at once. And I think this is not two problems but one.” Dov cleared his throat and continued.

“I have a related quarrel with Dr. Addams’s paper, too, if I should think in the contemporary terms that Damrosch invites us to use. Addams thinks aestheticism will rescue us from the old Victorian pieties. Oscar Wilde’s dream lives on! Yet I fear that today aestheticism has become as debased as liberalism in modern culture: not even art for art’s sake any more, just jokes for jokes’ sake. I admire something of what Dr. Addams says, but he goes too far. I cannot agree that art has no necessary connection to life, still less that the great Greek classics are wholly foreign to us. Eliot was right that we know more than the earlier writers did: for they are what we know. There

is such a thing as the Western tradition, multiple and various though it is. If you only ever live somewhere where people grow up in a different tradition altogether, you would see how deeply in our blood run Plato, Sophocles, the Bible, Milton. To deny this is to cut ourselves off from our moorings. This is a term, moorings, that I like better than ‘roots,’ and maybe Dr. Addams will like it too, since he is a sailor. Let’s not insist on an organic connection to people and places thousands of years or miles removed from us. Even when there may really be some organic rootedness, this is a mixed blessing at best—the tyrants who rule Iraq and Syria today may justly pride themselves on their unbroken links to ancient Assyrian butchers like Shalmaneser the Third, who boasted of crossing rivers on bridges made from the skulls of his enemies. In Israel too, I think it is a dead end to look for God-given roots, to insist that Torah gives the coordinates for the eternal topography of Eretz Israel. Never mind the politics: this is shoddy scholarship! Sure, we can plot out the acreage that God gave to Abraham, and I for one do not doubt that God exists. But *Abraham* never existed, so he is a pretty weak link if you are trying to trace the deed to the territory.”

Dov paused, as if listening to what he had just said. “*Deed*—a nice word in English, is it not?” he continued. “It can mean something that happened or it can be a piece of paper. A real Hebraism! Like our term *davar*, which means, indeed, both word and deed. But the fundamentalists have it backwards: yes, word and deed are inseparable, but this doesn’t mean all those words really reflect actual deeds. It means all those deeds, whatever they were or weren’t, are words and words only for us today. So let’s not assume that we’re rooted in or by our texts. We’re at sea, and our texts are at once our vessels, our moorings, and the sea itself. Our traditions sustain us and guide us; they also can drown us unless we handle them skillfully, I would say with a skeptical piety. Indeed, the text as sea is a traditional idea itself: ‘the sea of Talmud’ is a phrase found already in antiquity. Maybe Keats spoke for all poets when he declared that his name was writ in water.”

Dov paused, and looked out at the audience over the thick black rims of his glasses.

“So,” he went on. “My caution to Dr. Addams is that we have less freedom than he suggests, in choosing the texts we use, and in the ways we use them. This is a fact that I personally do not regret: complete freedom is never achieved, it is only approached by madmen and by tyrants, but at a terrible cost—even, I think, to themselves. Now, if I heard Professor Doddvic correctly, she ended her talk by saying that she takes her ‘bearings’ from Virginia Woolf. This is what brought the nautical metaphor to mind, and so I endorse her view. At least, I endorse the view I wish she would have. But I suspect things are more solid for Professor Doddvic than they appear to me. She seems to be navigating between fixed positions, the Left and the Right, and even allying herself with one position against the other. But how fixed can they be, these points of reference? Suppose I come to meet Professor Doddvic half way, won’t *her* left be *my* right, and her right, my left? Or worse yet, suppose her landmarks turn out to be wandering rocks, and we are the ones who are stuck in place? Either way, I sense a certain fixity in Professor Doddvic’s position. This may hinder us to see the works we discuss in a full depth of perspective. Let us say that we do want to emphasize Milton’s politics, for example, how far will we get if we begin by throwing out his Christianity, as she seems prepared to do? Are we left with some modern secular residue, Milton the Maoist? So I wonder if Professor Doddvic really does need Woolf so much to get her bearings, or is she going to end up giving marching orders to her authors?” Dov paused, looked over at us, gave a little shrug.

“Probably I have annoyed everyone enough by now, so I will stop.” He sat down. Marsha was indeed looking annoyed; Vic was looking bored, which didn’t seem much better. For my part, I was just wishing I’d never mentioned Dave Barry. I decided we’d better shift the discussion outward.

“Questions?” I asked brightly.

None were forthcoming. Of the dozen members of the audience when we began, three had disappeared during my talk, and several others had left as Dov began his commentary. Four people remained: two of them were studying the conference program together, the third was eating some kind

of pastry, and the final person seemed to be asleep. I glanced at my watch, and was relieved to see that our time was almost up anyway. I announced my regret at this discovery, and closed the session.

THE four of us pretty much avoided each other for the next couple of days. Did we have any common ground at all, personally or intellectually? I thought there had been intriguing ideas in each of the papers, but the panel had unfolded in a depressingly familiar pattern of mutual incomprehension and disregard; the whole was noticeably less than the sum of its parts. We might never have resumed our discussion at all, had we not been trapped by Japanese hospitality on a day trip to Hell.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Most of us conference participants were new to Japan, and probably only Vic and Marsha had yet ventured out of downtown Tokyo at all. All the guide books said that the volcanic mountains north of the city were spectacular, but it seemed difficult to negotiate them in a brief time if one didn't speak the language. So when our conference organizers gave us a day off, and offered us a blue-chip day trip complete with mountains, lake cruise, and a dramatic hilltop museum—all at a low cost heavily underwritten by the conference's twenty corporate benefactors—three hundred of the conferees signed on.

At the start, all was sweetness and light. As our eight plush tour buses pulled out of our host university in central Tokyo, we settled back with a collective sigh. What a pleasure to surrender, for a day, our fierce independence, our Western individualism, our adulthood itself—to be taken care of, each with a little pin on our lapel giving the number of our bus, nothing to do but glide out of the city past the press of inbound salarymen, sipping highly sweetened tea while listening to nuggets of Japanese history and culture from our resolutely cheerful tour guide.

The very absence of actual content from our hostess's patter was part of its charm. After days of abstruse analytical discussion, how nice to be asked the thorniest of questions only to receive the simplest of answers! ("Does anyone know the difference between a Shinto shrine and a Buddhist temple? No? The Shinto shrines are the ones with a vermillion gate in front.")

Even the first hints of a certain rigidity in the arrangements raised no alarm. We were repeatedly admonished that coffee, and only coffee, would be served with lunch; any other beverage could only have been ordered in advance. Even though I dislike coffee and never drink it, I found myself idly wondering why anyone would want anything other than what had been arranged for us. What embryo in its right mind would refuse its complimentary amniotic fluid, and churlishly insist instead on tea, Coke, or that best-selling Japanese sports drink, Pocari Sweat?

I had met Marsha on the line waiting for the buses, and we had agreed to sit together; we snagged Vic when he strolled up at the last minute, and he was sitting across the aisle from us. Seeing him roll his eyes at something the tour guide said, I expressed my surprise at finding him on a tour bus to begin with.

“For the MOA museum, my dear, I’d do stranger things than this,” he replied. “They have three National Treasures, you know; but they’re so far out of the way that I’ve never been.”

“I understand that part,” Marsha interjected, leaning over me to speak. “It’s the tour bus I don’t get. Why don’t you just rent a helicopter or something and go direct?”

“And miss the sulphur springs and the lake cruise on the fake Man-o’-War? Not for the world—*ça vaut le voyage* for the ethnographic curiosity alone.”

Marsha grimaced. “I think that’s a pretty condescending way to talk about the Japanese, Vic,” she said.

“The Japanese?” he replied. “I was talking about the conference-goers! When I want to see my Japanese friends, I don’t come to a conference, certainly not one in Japan; we meet up in Hawaii if the surf’s good, in Paris if it isn’t. No, no, it’s the professors I’m here to observe. As I am normally deprived of the dreary delights of departmental life, this is my chance to see the species up close.”

If Vic regarded the rest of us as specimens, our guides viewed us as schoolchildren on holiday, a perspective that became clear at our first stop, an outcropping of sulphurous hot springs and volcanic vents in Hakone.

The area was lovely, apart from a pervasive smell like rotten eggs and the somewhat uncanny belching sounds that the earth periodically emitted, but here we encountered a problem: there was so much to see in the region that we weren't going to be allowed to see any of it. I had learned from Fodor's that the great treat in Hakone would be to take a series of cable cars over the hot springs in the valley. This, however, we didn't have time to do, as our guides were intent on showing us the famous Lake Ashino as well, in the next valley. As a result, we had only a few minutes to admire the belching sulphur and watch the cable cars disappear into the haze. Our chief discovery at this stop, in fact, was Dov, who had been on one of the other buses but now joined us as we boarded our bus for the trip to the lake.

There, we were hustled onto a ferry, for a brief ride on the splendid Man-o'-War, a full-scale neo-Portuguese mock-up, which brought us to a resort town at the other end of the lake. There, Vic persuaded Marsha and me (Dov declined) to sneak away from lunch and rent a rowboat, for a delightful hour on the water. On the water but not in it, for the man who rented us the rowboats had warned us that the sparkling lake was unsafe for swimming. Some lingering respect for authority must still have clung to us, for we heeded his words even though the evidence of our own senses, on this hot summer day, belied his explanation: "The water is too cold. You will die." So we returned to our bus alive, but also twenty minutes late, to find that men with walkie-talkies were combing the area looking for the lost Americans.

Chastened, we resolved to be better group participants during the day's culminating activity, the visit to the museum. A lecture on Noh drama, an after-hours tour of the museum's galleries and its gardens, followed by dinner in the museum: does this sound like an introduction to penal servitude? Yet from the moment of our arrival at the MOA Museum of Art, we could sense that things were getting a little bizarre. The museum was built by a department store owner who went on to found a new religion, the Church of Messianity. He then turned to art collecting and museum-building as the culmination of his life's work, and indeed the museum seemed to have taken inspiration from each stage of his career. Perched atop a steep hill, the

museum was reached through a chain of long escalators buried in the hillside. Escalator after escalator flowed up to the heights above, while multi-colored fluorescent lights bathed the rippling concrete of the tunnel walls and ceiling, and Muzak from hidden speakers soothed the ears. We were given complimentary copies of the museum's catalogue, which describes the effect perfectly: "The tunnel-escalator system does not simply convey visitors to the main museum building but, through its environment, prepares them for the experience of viewing beautiful art objects. . . . Together the shape of the arch and the form of the stairs produce the best acoustics and lessen any fear a visitor may have when looking down the stairway from above. The beauty of the rhythmic, continuous ripples which converge at each landing, creates the fantasy of a different world for the visitor." A different world indeed, or rather an amalgam of usually separate earthly elements: department store, temple, and airport terminal all rolled into one? A metro station that just wouldn't quit?

Dov escalated up beside me, scowling.

Our journey culminated in a final multimedia blitz in the Circular Hall, a cave with marble floor and sprayed-concrete ceiling studded with woofers, tweeters, and laser machines, which treated us to a half-hour sound-and-light show. Thus prepared for the viewing of beautiful objects, we were ushered up some final escalators to the museum proper. Here our troubles began in earnest. The four of us soon tired of the lecture on Noh Drama—most of us knew too little to get much out of it; Vic knew too much—and so we tried to go off to the galleries. Every way we turned, however, museum guards politely but firmly escorted us back to the lecture hall. No impediment stood between us and the galleries, so far as we could tell, but our schedule itself: it wasn't yet time for us to see the art.

Finally we were released to the galleries, where we would at last have time aplenty. We were slated to spend a full four hours at the museum before our buses would take us down to the bullet train for Tokyo. This newly relaxed pace was a relief, but there was a problem: the museum had hardly any art at all on display. Half a dozen huge galleries were sparsely dotted with lonely looking ceramics and screens, while a couple of smaller rooms held

a random collection of European paintings. Two of the three National Treasures were in fragile condition, and were not even on display; the third, a small tea-storage jar of considerable technical interest to ceramicists, quickly exhausted its appeal for the uninitiated.

If there wasn't a lot to do indoors, at least it was a lovely late afternoon outside, and our thoughts soon turned to the verdant grounds stretching off toward bamboo and pine groves on both sides of the hill, looking out on a seaside resort town below. Going outside, Dov and I strolled off to the left down a curving dirt path. This, however, proved to have been intended only as a visual effect: within a few yards we were brought up short by a chain-link fence topped by barbed wire, barring our way to the bamboo grove. We returned to the museum and encountered Vic and Marsha, who had met the same fate in seeking the forest of pines off to the right.

There was nothing for it but to leave the grounds altogether, and go for a walk in the town. So we took the plunge down the escalators to the deserted Circular Hall, which was now murmuring a Mozart divertimento to itself in a dim pink light. Enchanted at the prospect of freedom—the outside doors were dimly visible in the depths below, and not a single guard could be seen blocking our retreat—Marsha and Vic paused for an impromptu waltz around the Circular Hall. We then completed our descent to the exit, but there was one detail we had not considered. We were special guests, viewing the museum after closing, and the doors to the outside had been locked. There was no way out.

When we again reached the top of the purgatorial stairway, we found that our fellow conference-goers had all arrived at the same conclusion. Little clusters of comparatists surged weakly back and forth, across the lawn, up the steps, into the galleries, and back out again. The tour organizers were nowhere to be found. What could we do? We tried a few sallies of pointed irony (“So when do we get our complimentary handcuffs?”), but even these witticisms began to wear thin after an hour or so, as the sun began to set and mosquitos (delicate, elegant Japanese ones) began to come out. Resigning ourselves to our situation, the four of us sat on a ledge and began talking.

“Doesn’t this museum give you pause, Dov?” Marsha asked. “I don’t really object on principle to your talk of tradition, but look *around* you. The po-mo escalator ride was great, but why not just come out on this incredible view? Do we really need this monumental mausoleum up here too? Art has a pious effect here, all right, but it’s the piety of an invented religion. The effect is to trap us, not to guide our wandering feet.”

“Look,” Dov replied, “I dislike the architecture myself. Yet the man who built this museum devoted years to collecting great art. It is a sign of our own immaturity if we cannot look at twenty remarkable objects for more than twenty seconds each. One of these great works alone should suffice us for our entire visit here, if we were truly as cultured as the curators expect us to be. Perhaps they treat us like children in the process, but we do not need to prove them right by acting the part. We should slow down, look around, absorb the beauty of a few objects. Or simply sit here with pleasure and respect as we contemplate this magnificent view.”

This was a new idea to me, and it also suggested more cultural flexibility than I’d realized Dov possessed. “What you’re saying reminds me of a passage in Barthes’s *Empire of Signs*,” I remarked. “It’s when he’s discoursing on the Japanese love of packaging. If I remember the passage, it goes something like this: ‘By its very perfection, the envelope, often repeated—you can be unwrapping a package forever—postpones the discovery of the object it contains. The object itself is often insignificant, for it is precisely a specialty of the Japanese package that the triviality of the thing is disproportionate to the luxury of the envelope. It is as if the object of the gift were the box, not what it contains: hordes of schoolboys, on a day’s outing, bring back a splendid package containing no one knows what, as if they had gone very far away and this was an occasion for them to devote themselves in troops to the ecstasy of the package.’”

“What a memory,” Marsha remarked. “You’d make such a good *hostage*!”

“Funny you should think of that analogy here,” Vic interjected, “as we contemplate Dov’s magnificent view across the barbed wire that keeps us trapped up here.”

“But is entrapment really the right idea?” I asked. “Isn’t Barthes’s ‘ecstasy of the package’ more to the point? The Japan Travel Bureau simply couldn’t imagine a greater pleasure for us than to conclude our tour contemplating an enormous *package*. Isn’t the museum itself its own chief exhibit?”

“The hell with Barthes!” Dov cried. “This is not the Beaubourg—physical embodiment of Barthes’s own prose on an off day, a series of self-referential gestures we enjoy for its own sake even if the content may be hard to find. I insist there is a real spiritual dimension here, not only some kind of self-display. It is different from Barthes’s packages: the museum’s layers of wrappings do not make up for some lack in what they enclose. They testify to its transcendent value, and this value would be decreased by raw, naked viewing. Atop ten flights of escalators, inside this gigantic sandstone shrine, in a nearly empty gallery ten meters high and twenty meters long, within a central display case, there rests the sole National Treasure we may see—an empty vase thirty centimeters tall. The museum does not display its art works, as we would think of display: it *enfolds* them. Most potent of all are the hidden National Treasures. These are truly enshrined, thus enhancing their invisible but radiant power. They are meant to share the glory of the emperor hidden within the Imperial Palace in the heart of Tokyo.”

“And we’re supposed to think of ourselves the same way,” I added. “Not as truant adolescents, but as valued guests in a country that truly honors scholars. Think of the fact that the Crown Prince opened our conference, which wouldn’t have attracted the notice of a Deputy Mayor in New York. Now they’re giving us the ultimate privilege: to be *wrapped up* in this magnificent package. We ourselves are the exhibits for a few hours, free to contemplate our own enclosure both in space and in time. I have to admit I’ve been thinking of this as a day trip to hell, but in our hosts’ eyes it was supposed to be a voyage to an earthly paradise, perfectly expressed in the founder’s aesthetic mysticism. I shouldn’t have been reminded of Dante’s Inferno—where there’s certainly more than enough to *do*. This is more like

Dante's Paradise, where circles of saints contemplate the endless son-et-lumière of the pulsating Celestial Rose."

Even Vic couldn't have turned a better phrase, I thought to myself.

"If you ask me, David," Marsha said, "I think you're starting to hyperventilate a little. For me, the kitschy effects neutralize the art, they just make it safe to consume. Busloads of office workers get sent here to get a controlled dose of transcendence, a little hit of aesthetic opium."

"Please, Marsha!" Vic interjected. "Would the world be a better place if these works of art were in storage somewhere and each clerk in the fellow's department stores had an extra twenty yen a week to spend playing pachinko? Do not misunderstand me—I favor an ethics of liberation as much as you do, it's just that we differ as to what that happy result would be. Your kind of liberation—forgive me, dear heart—is so *dreary*! So . . . *plodding*, even if it were possible, a most debatable idea. A bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, all-encompassing Respect for Everyone's Personal Values—who could disagree with such a program, really, if only it *were* possible, or even if it isn't? And yet, Marsha, such a sanitized set of virtues! Fine for Sunday School, I suppose, but why bother with art if a little political sermonette will do as well? Art as the vehicle of social progress, art as a forklift for moral freight—you're just so *American*, Marsha!"

"Oh, really? I'm the immigrants' kid, and your proper Bostonian background maybe makes you less American than me?"

"But of course, and not only if we compare your assimilationist parents to my loyally Belgian mother, not to mention her noble Luxembourgian ancestry. *I* am what I have made myself: a citizen of the world of art!"

Marsha bridled, started to speak, then checked herself for a moment. She began again, softly. "Vic, *dear heart*, I have to tell you, that kind of pomposity makes me puke."

Vic cast her a sharp glance; looked down, took a moment to examine the crease in his left trouser leg; replied with growing intensity.

"Imagine a childhood on Beacon Hill in the fifties, rattling around in a big house with a war bride mother who had, as a matter of fact, no reason

whatsoever to live in America except for an accidental husband with whom she had nothing whatever in common. Imagine, too, a father who knew it, who himself had been emotionally abandoned by a father whose footsteps he nonetheless followed into law. Who found success turn to ashes in his hands; who took to music as other men might take to drink. The *opera*—Vic gestured expansively, as though we were now seated in an opera house—“was my parents’ only common ground, and there they could witness, somehow share, the most exalted passions while also—best of all—remaining silent, *utterly* alone together in their box. No need to say a word to one another for hours on end: Mozart, my father’s favorite, Puccini my mother’s, but they never missed Wagner though neither cared much for *him*.”

“Why Wagner?” I asked.

“Length,” Vic replied, suddenly subdued.

Dov broke in. “I have right here my violin, Vic,” he said, “and I would be happy to serenade you if you like, but can we shift this away a little from the deprivations of your not so very deprived childhood? Or is ordinary unhappiness the only ground you give for your allegiance to art? Maybe you just need a good therapist?”

Vic smiled. “Don’t get me started on therapists, Dov, though sometime I might tell you the tale of the cardiologist who broke my heart: not as far from the point as you might think. But you’re right, of course, that I would be the last to rest my case on some insipid therapeutic view of art—all too close, to my mind, to a religious perspective, all very well for a rabbi *manqué* like Freud or for an ordained minister like Northrop Frye, hardly for me. My only point about my upbringing was that I was never drawn into the American worship of profit, gain, utility: when I look out at this sunset I don’t see pennies but peonies in heaven. The most useless beauty is the best of all!”

“So then your art ends in nature after all?” Dov asked. “I thought I heard you opposing them in your talk.”

“Only an analogy, Dov dear. And don’t suppose that a sunset is just one thing. To the psalmist, it is the voice of nature echoing the voice of God—

‘caeli enarrant gloriam Dei.’ To the scientist, an optical effect of light striking atmospheric dust. To the divine Oscar, it is a second-rate Turner, a pale imitation of the better beauties of art: a polemical exaggeration, of course, but an exaggeration in the right direction.”

“I don’t know, Vic,” I said. “Wilde himself couldn’t pull off an entirely asocial art. Would you really wish he’d finally found some refuge beyond good and evil? Think of Mishima, endlessly contemplating the cold beauties of the craters of the moon. Even sunsets: do you recall that passage in *Spring Snow*?”

“Oh, my God!” Dov exclaimed. “Another of Damrosch’s little touchstones—I can see it coming!”

“I think it’s kind of sweet David memorizes passages,” Marsha said. “It’s so *literary*.”

“I happen to think it helps to keep as much poetry and prose in mind as possible,” I retorted. “But I shall spare you the actual Mishima quotation,” I went on, putting a little asperity in my tone to cover a sinking feeling that I really couldn’t remember the passage after all. “The gist is that some of Mishima’s characters are viewing a gorgeous sunset, but then one of them reflects that the beauty they are seeing has no meaning, no human content, no vital connection to life at all. Mishima’s sunset is anything but the guide to life that Arnold wanted his touchstones to be. It’s more like an invitation to suicide, and to me it’s a chilling reminder of the nihilism too easily entailed in the worship of beauty for its own asocial sake. Is that what you’re advocating, Vic?”

“You’re doubly wrong, David,” Vic replied. “There wasn’t an asocial bone in Mishima’s well-toned body, and my problem with his work isn’t the lack of a social meaning but quite the contrary. He makes a sweeping bid to universalize an authoritarian social order, all the more perverse an enterprise as he knows perfectly well it’s an illusion in the modern world, and yet he won’t forgive society for giving it up even so. Art, for Mishima, is a form of masochism, a violent fiction to which he binds himself without even the excuse of belief.”

“You see all that in his sunset?” Marsha asked.

“All that and more, since he’s playing on a thousand years’ worth of symbolical clouds. You know I always see the ancient subtext when I look at anything modern, and Mishima’s subtexts aren’t far to seek in *Spring Snow*, beginning with his programmatic rewriting of *The Tale of Genji*. Recall, my friends, the old woodcuts reproduced in Seidensticker’s *Genji* translation—you know it, don’t you?—where clouds carry a double valence, both metaphysical and political. They suggest the transience of the floating world and also the divine elevation of the Emperor, the Son of Heaven, always shrouded from our view by radiant clouds. Mishima’s suicidal nihilism has everything to do with the modern discovery that the Son of Heaven isn’t behind those clouds after all. Not a necessary cause of grief, to me a cause for celebration even, but for Mishima the bitter paradox behind his insistence that we should set back up the pre-Meiji authoritarianism that the old metaphysics had justified, even though we now see that whole worldview for the fiction it was. Mishima resembles no one so much as the Baron de Charlus, in Proust—also echoed in *Spring Snow*—who knows that the boys he hires to whip him are innocent young things but who requires them to act the part of vicious thugs, hoping thereby to flog himself, so to say, into a belief in his own sordid play. Mishima’s sunset has nothing to do with nature, everything to do with a twisted idea of culture that I reject.”

“And so,” Marsha asked, “what are sunsets to you?”

“They are nothing, literally nothing but a play of light on dust and vapor—and they are breathtaking. They are an emanation of beauty, somewhat as Suzanne Langer defined art, but on a different scale, in a different order of being: more ephemeral than art, also vaster, more securely permanent in their recurrence than any work of art will ever be: a summons, a reproach, a despair: a testimony to our own transience, a mockery of our will to impose meaning on ravishing beauty (is that one a duck? a *bunny*?), an affront to every idea of art as the pat little patterning of social data within the artist’s soul: a revelation that art need not be egotism only but an escape from egotism, a dissolution that somehow we experience as freedom. What could be more liberating, what can be less neatly attached to some program of self-improvement or social change?”

Marsha shook her head, but didn't reply. The sun had set; it was growing chilly, and the elegant mosquitoes were now out in force. We all got up and went back into the museum, where dinner was now being served in an empty gallery.

I SAW little of my friends in the remaining few days of the conference. I hoped we might have some further conversation once the sessions ended; perversely, perhaps, I was reluctant to give up on our discussions just when the deep fault lines between our views had come to light. As it turned out, though, Dov left immediately upon the conclusion of the conference, flying westward so as to stop off and see his sons in Israel en route back to California. Marsha and Vic stayed on in Japan but went off to Nara on their own, not thinking—or wishing?—to invite me along.

At loose ends, I joined up with a dozen conference-goers and went to Kyoto. Though they were congenial enough companions, they always seemed to want to rush from one important site to the next, just when I was ready to settle in for a while. Had I learned the spiritual lesson of the museum incarceration, or was I simply falling into a classic post-conference daze, the flip side of my companions' manic energy? Conversations among this group oscillated between guidebook recitations and well-worn academic shoptalk, and we were seeing so much that we were hardly seeing anything. Had we really come seven thousand miles to stand before a reclining Buddha and gossip about Harold Bloom? True, there was a certain similarity, but the quality of the gossip was hardly commensurate with the quality of the carving.

Breaking away from the group, I found myself almost alone at the Ryoanji temple at dusk. In the temple rock garden, miniature mountains of black stone rose from the carefully raked waves of white gravel lapping their shores. I had first heard of this rock garden early in my career, when I was an outside examiner for a dissertation defense in East Asian. Barely finished with my dissertation myself, I had shuddered inwardly at the two-hour grilling the candidate received from his own sponsor. The Ryoanji garden had provided one of the more memorable moments in this ordeal. "Now,

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Mr. Konrad,” the sponsor had inquired, pointing a slender finger at the page before him and shooting a penetrating glance at the hapless candidate; “you say on page three hundred that there are *several rocks* in the garden at Ryoanji. There are, of course, *fifteen rocks* at Ryoanji. Would you really call that *several*?” Sweat broke out on the candidate’s upper lip; I don’t recall his reply.

Seated in the twilight garden, I now saw that the mountain-rocks were arranged in three rhythmic clusters, of seven, five, and three rocks; clearly a significant ordering, a sort of visual haiku. The rocks were carefully placed so that some would always be hidden from any given vantage point on the wooden viewing balcony. Had Bashō written his tribute to Kyoto in this garden?

At the cuckoo’s cry—
when in Kyoto
I long for Kyoto.

Grateful though I was for this moment of reflective solitude, I found myself the next morning missing Vic and Marsha when I was struck by the enormous difference between the elegant golden shrine of Kinkakuji, made for aristocratic contemplation, and the messy, noisy, vibrantly populist Kiyomizudera, where at every turn one could ring a bell, decorate a statue, or buy an amulet guaranteeing good results on one’s examinations. Marsha would have had interesting observations on the class issues, and Vic could have told us more than the guide books did about the temple architecture. He and Marsha might even have found common ground in discussing the two shrines’ very different but equally creative modes of relating to their landscape settings.

I can’t say that I missed Dov as such—or Dov *an sich*, as I thought of him—though I had a sudden wish for an argument about Middle Eastern politics when I bought a sports drink at a vending machine in downtown Kyoto. This was the summer just after the war against Saddam Hussein. The fighting in Kuwait had ended only weeks earlier, but at this vending machine I found a can of soda printed in a battle-fatigue pattern. Its name,

given both in English and Japanese, was “Desert Storm: The Carbonated Beverage for Active People with Fighting Spirit.” Not a drink to encounter on one’s own.

Intimidating though my three Tokyo companions were, I wanted to see more of them. A full year went by, however, in which we only had sporadic contact by e-mail. Clearly, we would never get together again unless I made a deliberate effort. It occurred to me that the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association would provide a good occasion, and so in the fall of 1992 I wrote to the others, proposing a panel for the next convention, to be held at Indiana University the following March. I was pleasantly surprised when they each accepted my invitation to join me in Bloomington. Our topic was to be “The Limits of Theory,” and I hoped for a lively discussion. I was all too correct.