

The Silent Social Order of the Theory Classroom

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The glitter of theory and the sparkle of social order¹

"I study myth because I was told to do so." —Joan, cultural studies student, last day of class.

Like many other students, I was a loner when I went to college, an introvert, an isolate. In the beginning, to be frank, it was often estranging, occasionally melancholy. Does that make it a paradox that I turned to anthropological studies of the university, institutional alienation becoming ethnographic intimacy? My fourth year, I conducted a season of fieldwork in the "theory" classes of the English department at Cornell University. This document is my analysis of the social order I found there, of the social order of theory, so to speak.

"Theory" is a polysemous term; my informants defined it in contradictory ways. It is a questioning of common sense. Or a way of denaturalizing myths. Or a set of theories of interpretation. It's "a way of thinking, it's not outside you," one professor told me. Another professor said that theory began at an academic conference at Johns Hopkins in 1966, at which several famous French intellectuals were present (Macksey & Donato 1977). For analytic purposes I will define theory more sociologically: 'theory' is an indigenous label designating the exclusive discourse and social-symbolic field of a group of intellectual elites centered on the humanities sector of universities. In American literary studies, the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s witnessed an extensive importation of structuralist and post-structuralist theory, largely from France (Lamont 1987, Leitch 2003). By the time of my fieldwork in 2003, this American intellectual avant-garde, retaining a distinctive dialect and many canonical figures from French post-structuralism, had become professionally dominant in American literary studies, and elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences (Williams 1994, Patai and Corral 2005). In this context, the term "theory" was often used in the abstract singular, its referent fluctuating between critical thinking in general, and local post-structuralist-inflected academic discourses. This referential ambiguity may well have been ideologically potent, insofar as it sanctified local academic discourse as a form of thought tout court. And theory remained prominent at Cornell even after its moment in the limelight of literary studies, 1980s "high theory"; a number of successful theoretical actors, such as Jonathan Culler, Dominick LaCapra, Biddy Martin, and Philip Lewis, attained prominent institutional roles later in their careers. This project, then, is an examination of "theory" in the classroom at this institutionalized moment, of theory in its moment of transmission and reproduction, of theory canonized as a potent academic value and medium of social belonging (Chow 2003). Although most theorists of my acquaintance do not define theory in sociological terms, I would insist that even a "a way of thinking" is enacted only in social practice and is, thus, amenable to empirical inquiry.

My empirical research consisted of silent observation of two English department theory classes, coupled with more than a dozen long interviews. One of the classes was a lower-division cultural studies class taught by "Elizabeth R."; the other, an upper-division literary theory class

¹ I am indebted to my anthropology teachers Dominic Boyer, Hiro Miyazaki, Steve Sangren, and Johanna Schoss; to David DeVries and the College of Arts & Sciences Undergraduate Research Fund for logistical help; to Jonathan Culler, Satya Mohanty, and their colleagues for acquainting me with theory in the first place; and finally, above all, to my research subjects, whom I promised not to name.

taught by "James S."² Both were conceived as seminars, and they met twice weekly around wooden tables in impersonal off-white fluorescent-lit rooms with high ceilings and wooden trim. (A few literary theory students had to sit against the wall, for the table was too small.) When I spoke to the professors at the end of the semester, neither were altogether happy with their classes; as for the students, they felt palpable ambivalence.

The literary theory students were quite different from the cultural studies students. They were a larger group, more homogeneous, experienced in studying literature. Their professor, J. S., was a middle-aged man who spoke rapidly and authoritatively, with a concern for correct presentation of concepts and a taste for analogical illustration. He divided the class into a set of theoretical movements: New Criticism, deconstruction, and New Historicism. For pedagogical purposes, at least, he equated theory with the "metacritical mode," that is, the theory of criticism and interpretation. He illustrated with the memorable, naturalizing analogy: "A plant doesn't need to be a biologist."

The cultural studies class, on the other hand, was more varied in age and major, and more racially mixed. E.R., a middle-aged woman, made frequent efforts to be personable and friendly, allowing a greater amount of divergence in discussion topics. The pedagogy was divided between theoretical essays (e.g. from Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and Dick Hebdige) and "cultural texts," including films, print advertisements and poetry. E.R. spoke in more markedly theoretical language, and I am certain that students often felt that they had no idea what she was saying; moreover, they were seldom able to communicate to her that they misunderstood. "I'll tell her that I don't understand, but her explanations don't make sense," Christy said one day before class.³

The most noticeable difference between the two classes, in terms of classroom discourse, was in the degree of public disagreement. To put it simply, students in the cultural studies class sometimes quarreled publicly with the professor, while in the literary theory class, explicit disagreement with the professor's authority was never expressed. The quarrels in cultural studies, I think, were made possible by the students' emotional and intellectual detachment from the subject matter, combined perhaps with differences in teaching styles. As a result, discourse was often fragmented; the rhetoric of progress that J.S. would construct in literary theory was absent. I found it difficult to take notes in that class, because I often couldn't distinguish which comments were important to the discussion.

I should clarify my own research strategy. I began with the intention of participating in class discussion, like any other student. Immediately, though, I realized that my already-developed theoretical tendencies separated me from the other students and predisposed me to disagree with the epistemological positions of many of the theoretical authors. Early in the semester, I got in a nervewracking public argument with J.S., over whether context-free statements exist; after ten minutes of fruitless disagreement, witnessed by the students who sat staring at me mutely, I gave up talking for the rest of the semester. Much to my surprise, neither students nor professors were much inclined to inquire about my project, and seemed content to play the passive role they seemed to imagine I expected of them, as if they envisioned me as an uninvolved positivist ethnographer. They were aware that I was watching them, and made occasional jokes, but little more. The literary theory professor, J.S., was the only one who

² I use pseudonyms for all my research subjects.

³ It seems, for Christy as for other students, that an utterance is not felt to be successful unless the teacher acknowledges it and the student understands and acknowledges that acknowledgement; there is a small-scale dialectic of recognition.

seemed remarkably self-conscious about my presence. On the first day of class, he suggested that I "think about" how much I should talk to him, lest my presence have a "recursive" effect. At the end of the semester, the very last thing he told me was that my project had made him slightly apprehensive from the beginning, though he added that my presence had turned out to do no harm. I myself began fieldwork filled with anxiety (social, methodological and theoretical), though by the end it had mostly evaporated.

The analysis stemming from this scene follows four lines. I initially examine the ritual structures of authority, time and space implicit in classroom practice. I then turn to the propagation of knowledge and professorial power through different genres of classroom discourse. From there I move to a more detailed consideration of affective and ideological stances towards academic knowledge and ignorance, leading into an analysis of "text-fetishism" as a structuring ideology of classroom knowledge-making. I close with some remarks on the significance of my analysis for our understanding of academic fields, and for the epistemological costs and benefits of reflexive knowledge. I should caution that I do not attempt a complete "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of the classroom situation: this is not a reckoning with every moment of classroom practice, but a "socioanalysis" (Sangren 2000, cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) of the classroom as an ideologically dynamic, contradictory moment in academic social reproduction. It is an analysis more inspired by Paul Willis (1977) than by prior research on universities (e.g., Perry 1970, Moffatt 1989, Graff 1987, Chiseri-Strater 1991, Mertz 1996, Slaughter and Leslie 1997). The main risk, perhaps, is over-systematization, over-analysis. I should say at the start, then, that I did witness weeks and weeks of bored, quiet students, made numb by the search for theory; the classroom in addition to being structured along several axes was also rampant with boredom. Structured activity, here as elsewhere, coexisted with passivity and disengagement.

Classroom time, space and power in bureaucratic practice

The social form of the classroom is composed of two distinct sets of social practices: *bureaucratic practices* and *didactic practices*. Bureaucratic practices are highly ritualized and efficacious, and form the link between the classroom and the institution as a whole, though they are seldom explicitly discussed.⁴ I call them bureaucratic because they are perceived as just that: mundane, like "housekeeping," and not intrinsically meaningful. They are things like the rules given in the syllabus, the due dates for essays, the details of reading assignments: everything, in short, related to the course's *official* requirements. Didactic practices, on the other hand, constitute what is called "discussion," occupying the vast majority of classroom time with several different discourse genres.⁵ If didactic practices are thus the locus of classroom learning, then bureaucratic practices are the locus of learning what to learn and how to learn it: bureaucratic practices produce the necessary classroom *meta-knowledge*.

The official relation between bureaucratic and didactic practices is that of *form to content*. The attendant *paradox* of classroom structure is that the form maintained by bureaucratic practices is at once extremely powerful – for it is attended to at the very beginning of class, it brooks no ambiguity, and it has direct effects on the lives of the students – but also,

⁴ In my own experience, students constantly do talk about the bureaucratic requirements *outside* of class; a typical exchange would be, "I'm writing a paper." "Oh yeah? When's it due? How long does it have to be?" — as if the *length* were much more important than the *content*.

⁵ Reading texts and writing essays are also didactic practices, though performed outside of the classroom itself.

peculiarly, not thought to have much importance.⁶ No one thinks that the formal, bureaucratic structure of a class has any meaning in itself, yet it is the locus of direct power over the students and, indeed, the professor. I spoke to a graduate student, teaching her first class, who made this very clear. "We don't have to follow all the formalities of the syllabus," she said, "[but] you can't come to class and say, 'essay due next class.' You also have to gain authority over your students — that's hard to do without establishing certain boundaries and rules." The implicit assumption is that bureaucratic form is not an end in itself, but only a pragmatic necessity of classroom functioning. I would add only that this smooth functioning is, in effect, the maintenance of institutional order, and hence primarily the politics of the status quo.

Bureaucratic practice appears in a stream of seemingly dull professorial remarks. "Was anyone not here last time and thus did anyone not get a copy of the revised syllabus?" "I want to do a little syllabus rattling, first — the 14th, next Tuesday, we're gonna have a little deconstruction workshop... the 16th, please add to it pages 131-142 from the Coleridge volume." "For next time, we'll be reading the Eilenberg essay..." "So for Thursday, more *Heart of Darkness*..." "Let's start with the bearings — the possible bearings of this passage on the text for next time."

These meta-commentaries on classroom practice, and bureaucratic practice more generally, construct a ritual *frame* around the often-chaotic didactic discourse. The classroom is not a ritual, strictly speaking, since unlike a ritual its formal structure is ever-changing and its social effects are unpredictable.⁷ Yet bureaucratic discourse has a highly ritualized form. These bureaucratic utterances are more than purely pragmatic; they come before all other conversational topics, and unlike didactic discourse, they are "closed to construal" (Hanks 1996:244), for they refer concretely to concrete tasks and seem to be transparently understood.

The bureaucratic frame, I would argue, is the mechanism by which the classroom is *recognizable as such*, the means of differentiating the classroom from other social practices. The bureaucratic organization of student tasks and evaluations — and above all the central locus of institutional domination, the *grading* procedure — are what separates the classroom from other forms of intellectual engagement. And, paradoxically, *it is bureaucratic practice, not pedagogical content, that has the most immediate practical effect on students' lives*. A comment like, "The 16th, please add to it pages 131-142 from the Coleridge volume," is a speech act with potentially immediate practical impact for students, while a recitation of, say, Marxist axioms entails no such practical obligations. Students do not always fulfill their assignments, of course, but they do have a keen sense of their course requirements, and sometimes spend much time on them. One student reported that it takes ten hours to write a paper; another told me that "sometimes it has taken an entire day out of a weekend." Both students considered this an excessive amount of time to spend on a short essay — yet they *did* spend it, which only demonstrates the efficacy of bureaucratic organization.

The order that the syllabus creates

Through bureaucratic practice, the professor manifests his or her ability to structure the moral and pedagogical orders of the classroom. Such bureaucratic power is most clearly objectified in the syllabus. In the literary theory class, the syllabus was organized as follows:

⁶ We could say that form overwhelms and eclipses content in practice, even as form is firmly subordinated to content in local ideology.

⁷ The idea of ritual (V. Turner 1967, T. Turner 1977) entails a fixed social effect wedded to a formal structure. The ritual of "commencement," for example, has a traditional form whose fixed effect is to transform college students into college graduates.

1. Course title, course number, semester, time and room number.
2. Professor's name, office hours, and contact information.
3. Course description (reprinted from the course catalog).
4. List of texts used in the class.
5. Requirements (in sum: reading, discussion, and three essays whose due dates were given).
6. Calendar – divided into thematic subsections. The date of each day of class corresponds with the reading assignment for that day.

The syllabus articulates, first, a power structure, and second, a spatiotemporal structure. The power structure amounts to a hierarchical relation between professor and students; as everyone knows, this hierarchical relation is enforced by the institutionally instituted grading process, for it is the professor who grades the students. The syllabus specifies the evaluative structures that constitute the most direct means of domination over the students: it is a material precipitate of power relations. It also embodies a certain financial coercion, insofar as it provides a list of texts that students must buy, or else suffer the inconvenience of reading them in the library.

The calendar, in the last section of the syllabus, is largely responsible for instituting the peculiar spacetime of the classroom.⁸ The idea of an "intersubjective spacetime," due to Nancy Munn, is that every practice constructs particular socially mediated perceptions and structures of time and space (1986:10). The syllabus accomplishes this by dividing time into a sequence of class sessions, texts, theoretical themes, and written assignments. And it does not just divide time up; it also institutes temporal relations between the units of division. An assigned text *precedes* a particular discussion; or texts and class meetings are encompassed *within* the timespan of a theoretical theme; or the readings may be read in the order in which they were written, such that the temporal structure of the classroom becomes iconic of the historical structure of critical discourse. And not only are these temporal relations realized objectively in classroom practice, they also become subjectively salient for participants. Students said they were anxious when a paper was due "*only one day after* the start of a new theory." Or a student complained before class: "I was like oh crap I totally forgot and I had to go home and get the poems and read them." This kind of temporal structure is more than just a list of requirements: it creates a structure of *expectations* for the classroom, forming a kind of prospective history.

The spatial structure of the classroom is even more naturalized than the temporal structure. It divides space into two parts — *in* class, or *out* of it — and attributes the highest moral value to the former category. Students who are "absent," who frequently fail to appear in class, may be punished and are, at any rate, looked down upon, sometimes even by their fellow students. Such a spatial morality was codified in an oddly frank passage of the cultural studies syllabus:

"Reality and attendance: This class meets at 8:40 twice a week, and we will begin punctually. If you cannot function at that time of the morning, or if 'punctual' is not an operative term for you, it does not mean you are a bad person. It does mean that you should take another class."

The classroom institutes a spatial *constancy* and a temporal rhythm: it always meets in the same place at the same time, or rather after a fixed and repeated interval of time. The pressure to conform to this spatial structure (to be in the classroom at the proper moment) is just as real as

⁸ The classroom spacetime is of course a part of the spacetime peculiar to the university at large. For a vivid description and analysis of the calendrical cycles of student life, see Bourdieu and Passeron (1979:29-32).

the pressure exerted by the temporal structure (to do the assignments on time), as shown by this incident:

J.S. put down his papers at the head of the table and walked back out of the room. When he returned a few minutes later, he reported, "I put my stuff down and went out in the hall... when I came back, I went in one room short, and no one was there! I thought, sometimes they don't show up, but this is the first time they've *left*." There was amusement on the students' faces.

Here, J.S.' momentary indignation with what he mistook for his students' departures is directly due to the moral value of *being-in-class*.

A moment of crisis in institutional perspective

From his usual position at the head of the table, J.S. said to the class, "I don't usually do this, but today I'm going to give you my opinion on the way things have been going in class so far... Then you can tell me how you think it's going, and we can discuss where to go from there." In a moment of apparent nervousness, covered by a smile, he glanced at me and said, "I don't know what this does from an anthropological perspective — it's a kind of meta-anthropological moment."

"First of all," he said, "there's a kind of slowness or reluctance in discussion on topics ranging from what are the main ideas of a text to what your own responses are... sometimes it's very quiet in here... it's not, I don't think, simply a question of group dynamics—certainly not personality or ability... the enterprise of doing theory is not particularly engaging or important to you—I feel that you feel it's not very compelling... the enterprise of doing theory is — is what's at stake here. I kind of dread a long slog through Marxism, New Criticism, feminism..."

"So what I suggest," he said eventually, "is that we just bag the rest the theoretical essays and read poems from our anthology and raise theoretical issues only as they arrive in interpretation." Explaining this proposal, he said, "It's not *just* that I want to make you happy but that I want to get us more aligned." He then solicited comments from the students, suggesting that there were three options: to keep the syllabus more or less as originally written, to adopt his proposal of reading poems and not theory, or to do "something else" that the students might propose.

The first student to respond said, "That's part of what I wanted — I agree with you that it's really hard and difficult to engage with theory, it's hard to get into." He spoke a bit more and concluded, "But I like your idea."

One student said, "I agree that it's been a bit sluggish."

The professor talked about the day when there was a critical workshop on poems—on that day, he said, people were more willing to talk. However, he commented, "Structurally, there's a way to account for the spontaneity" — people had no choice but to talk on that day.

One of the more theoretically advanced students, Margaret, said "I feel like it would be a lot more interesting to talk about theory in relation to a text... like in reading *Heart of Darkness* or *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*."

Another student said, "I think for me deconstruction is really hard and part of the reason why I haven't been contributing more is that I don't really feel like I have a grasp on the material."

"I'm really interested in deconstruction but I have no prior background."

"I'm still working out my own position."

One person confessed that sometimes the reason he didn't talk was because on some days he hadn't "entirely done all of the reading."

Margaret said, "I feel like I wanna learn about these topics because they're talked about so much in other [situations] and I don't really know what they mean, like new historicism or deconstructivism."

The professor asked them, "How many want to stick with the syllabus in full knowledge of the arbitrariness of syllabi?" and all but a couple of students raised their hands.

"I'm trying to find out what we can do to reanimate our discussions — I'm trying to recover a sense that what we're doing is important—to us. [I'd like it to be] like the exchange in a seminar instead of a stiltedness or strain." I think after that he asked the class if there were particular things they were interested in working on.

Margaret said, "I feel like the terms structuralism and poststructuralism come up a lot and I don't really know exactly what these mean — could we do something with that?" (She might have said "postmodernism" rather than "poststructuralism"; my notes are unclear.)

The professor replied with a really brief definition of structuralism—"Structuralism is a form of inquiry that investigates the conditions of possibility of meaning in texts — I didn't include it because it doesn't [address] individual texts." But, at that point, J.S. was resigned to the continuation of the syllabus as given, and he said "Let's turn to the Eilenberg essay," which they discussed for the rest of class.

This is a discussion profoundly shaped by the social structure of the classroom, and the social positions and interests of the participants. True enough, the discussion represents an attempt by the professor to break away from the normal classroom structure, to transcend normal classroom power relations in order to openly assess the class. Yet the attempt is both unsuccessful and bound within the pre-existing social order. The motivation for the attempt was the professor's dissatisfaction with his overly "passive" students. He said to me later, "I was trying to save myself the pain" of going through with the class as it was: as if he were wounded by his students' very passivity. And his students *rejected* his attempt his attempt to reshape the classroom.⁹

In strategic terms, the professor pursues an appeal to a constructed moral crisis.¹⁰ In distinctively normative language, he calls his students "slow," "reluctant," "quiet," uninterested, unengaged and uncompelled by literary theory. At a later moment, conversely, he articulates his moral ideals for collective classroom practice: animation in discussion, "a sense that what we're doing is important," the values of seminar exchange, and a lack of "stiltedness or strain." In short, he displays his discursive privilege to articulate a *moral structure* of classroom practice: engagement and activity are valued over silence and passivity. He tries to persuade the class that class discussion has not been satisfying, that this lack of satisfaction is a moral crisis whose solution is a reconnection of moral values to public class discourse. As is evident from this discussion, however, the professor is not guaranteed success in these efforts, and is unable to determine the students' reception of his acts.

The student response is also strategic, if contradictory. Some students initially agree with the professor's evaluation of the class, but their ultimate resistance to changing the syllabus is understandable in terms of their independent agency and interests. In part, they have a general allegiance to the classroom order articulated in the syllabus; though that order is created by the professor, it becomes quite independent of him. Faced with a choice between the syllabus or a new professorial reform, the students chose the syllabus. This pedagogical conservatism is

⁹ As my advisor put it to me, "his well-intentioned democratic impulse was absolutely wrecked against the entire social organization of undergraduate education" (email from Dominic Boyer, 21 October 2003).

¹⁰ By "moral," I mean an affect-laden normative attitude.

arguably a manifestation of the *students'* liminal power to shape the pedagogical order, by ratifying or rejecting professorial proposals.

In concrete terms, of course, the students' choice was between either a "more theoretical" or a "more literary or interpretive" pedagogy. It is obvious from their remarks that they chose the former based not only on a pedagogical conservatism but also on their own desire for theory. Several students simultaneously insisted on their ignorance of *and* interest in theory. "I'm really interested in deconstruction but I have no prior background," was one exemplary remark. Their remarks, it seems to me, make apparent that an acquaintance with the social value of theory is entirely *separable* from actual theoretical knowledge or practices.¹¹ The students chose the more theoretical pedagogy, then, at least partly out of a curiosity or *interest* in the prestige that they associate with theoretical discourse, in the context of theory's high status in Cornell academic circles.

In short, the scene reveals a clash of desires that embody institutionally determined strategies: for students and professor alike, desire and its public expression are embedded in the institutional order. The students opt for a theory-centric pedagogy in the context of a theory-centric institution, while the professor tries to enact a *revitalization ritual* that is equally institutionally sanctioned and encouraged.¹² In broader terms, pedagogical reform is not an escape from the institutional order, but a crucial piece of it: the institution is not a static entity, but rather is structurally organized as a constant labor of renewal and recalibration. Such recalibrations constantly occur in the university, as it serves the institution, no doubt, for classrooms to be smooth and successful social units.¹³ A reformist desire for "engagement," thus, is not the professor's peculiarity, but is rather a shared institutional value that the professor has internalized.

Epistemic form and professorial authority in didactic discourse

A taxonomy of genres

In didactic discourse, more complex than bureaucratic practice, I distinguished five principle discourse genres, which I call *professorial monologue*, *textual quotation*, *interrogation*, *group interpretation*, and *student presentation*.¹⁴ In empirical terms, I distinguish them by their participant role structures (Goffman 1979, Hanks 1997:207-211), and by their characteristic social effects and epistemic forms. In hopes of demonstrating at least the existence of the speech genres I have listed, I would begin with a day from the literary theory class in which the class looked at an essay on Marxist literary criticism. In the left-hand margin, I have noted some characteristic speech acts, and (in bold type) the start of a new discourse genre.

Literary Theory class on Marxist Literary Criticism.

Professorial Professor J.S. handed back his students' essays at the beginning of class and

¹¹ This acquaintance is especially evident in Margaret's repeated frustration with her ignorance of theoretical *terminology* (e.g. 'structuralism,' 'deconstructivism'): among the taboos involved with language is an especially potent one that surrounds the recognition of words themselves, and it seems to me that students may come to (mis)recognize the social value of theory because they clearly perceive their inability to recognize foreign theoretical terms that – apparently – mean something to their teachers or classmates.

¹² Anthony Wallace wrote a programmatic and now very outdated article defining a revitalization movement as "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (1956:265). This seems to me an exact description of the task that the professor was trying to propose.

¹³ Failed appeals for recalibration are common, and there are frequent proclamations of academic crisis, not to mention exhortations to be open to institutional change (Greenwood 1999, Miyazaki 2004, Boyer 2003, Cornell University 1997).

¹⁴ My concept of genre is derived from Hanks' "discourse genre" (1987) and from Bakhtin (1981:288).

Monologue	began to speak. "One of the things I realized is that some of you just don't like theory. You want a less mediated less conscious approach to the text. I think that some of the dislike has bled over... away from argument towards assertion. A more effective essay is one that takes up the critical text in some detail and argues for one position, again, in some detail... I'm not against music history or anthropology – I just like doing English. While you may not agree with them, they have a kind of sense to them... I myself practice a kind of formalist, slash, deconstructionist criticism... I'm not arguing against your theoretical position [but] how you argue it."
Interrogation	He moved on to the material. "I don't know how far we'll get today in Marxism or New Historicism – I want to pretend that I just doddered in and I don't know anything about Marxism."
<i>Prompt</i>	The students put forth some Marxist assumptions, in response to J.S.' prompting.
<i>Double-voiced paraphrase...</i>	"That any piece of literature is a product of something else." "Assumptions, intentions." "And also socio-economic factors." "I think history plays an important part." "I don't know that literature is a product of history – maybe literature is a product of history and history is a product of literature," said A. "Literature does work," said Diana.
<i>Clarification</i>	"Is that the same as what A said?" asked J.S. "I don't know," Diana replied.
<i>Prompt</i>	"Do you want to develop any of these – unpack any of these terms?" asked J.S.
<i>Paraphrase....</i>	"Because it's a product of all these things you can't isolate it," Mark said of the literary text. "You have to look at it within a web of socio-economic factors." "You have to be historically specific," said Justin. "Let me just add to that," said J.S. "The modes of analysis we've read so far have been formalist. New Historicism is a historicism." "So literature does the work of the proletariat," said Justin.
<i>Clarification</i>	"For the proletariat," said J.S. "It has a certain – revolutionary aspect," said Justin.
<i>Clarification, Demand</i>	"Certainly during the Soviet period..." J.S. replied. "What does Marxism generally assume about literature?" he asked. "It creates consciousness."
<i>Clarification / Demand</i>	"Possibly – what kind of consciousness?" said J.S.
<i>Demand</i>	Silence.
<i>Demand</i>	"What term do Marxists use?"
<i>Paraphrase</i>	"Schema," said Margaret.
<i>Critique</i>	"No—" said J.S. "Ideology," someone said eventually.
<i>Demand</i>	"What do Marxists see literature as producing?" asked J.S. "Commodified forms of intellectual inquiry," said Margaret with a laugh.

	"Nice phrase," said J.S. Continuing, he elicited the term "dominant class" from the students.
<i>Demand</i>	"So what do we mean by ideology?" he asked finally.
	"It's kind of a set of beliefs that explains social norms," Lucy said.
<i>Demand</i>	"Are they true beliefs?" asked J.S.
	"It depends on your perspective," she replied.
Professorial monologue	"Marxists usually define it as an imaginary relationship to reality," said J.S. He recounted an argument about the way that American individualism supports inequality.
	"I think it's really important that ideology be perceived as the truth because otherwise there would be a certain revolutionary potential... What other terms are missing?" He paused for a moment. "I'll just add one – hegemony. How's that used, do you recall?"
Interrogation Demand	
<i>Paraphrase</i>	"It's been defined as a system of oppression that depends on the consent of the oppressed," said Margaret.
	J.S. described redescription by the oppressor, and asked if anyone could give an example.
	"Wouldn't the example you just gave – if someone ran for election and said everyone's equal – to get a bigger share of the pie"
	"Another example?" asked J.S.
	"In a cult... they believe the cult leader is divinely inspired by god."
<i>Question</i>	"What did you define hegemony as, again?" asked Justin.
<i>Prompt</i>	J.S. repeated verbatim his earlier definition. "Anything else we want to put up here as Marxist terms or ideas?" He asked a question, which I didn't record, and then said "What a bad question." He asked the students to discuss the opposition between base and superstructure.
<i>Paraphrase</i>	"The base is economic and the superstructure is arts and [culture]... that are sort of determined by economics—that were once thought to be determined by economics."
	"Nice self-correcting sentence," J.S. observed. "What's the simplest relation between base and superstructure?"
	"Everything's determined by economics," said a student.
<i>Clarification</i>	"That's simple reflection – vulgar Marxism." He wrote a name on the board – Louis Althusser, associated with "Relative autonomy."
<i>Demand</i>	"What's the aim of Marxist literary criticism? What are the <i>aims</i> of Marxist literary criticism?" he asked.
<i>Paraphrase</i>	"To expose ideology," said Justin.
	"Why?"
	"It doesn't want to conform to the commodified forms of knowledge," said Margaret.
	"The old ideology will be broken down," Justin said.
	"What happens then?" J.S. asked.
	"A new ideology will spring up," Justin said.
<i>Partial monologue</i>	J.S. described two Marxist theories of the critic's role – "trickle-down theory of teaching" versus the view that "we're on the barricades."
	"I'm not trying to tell this in [a biased way] – I'm just trying to speak in clear

- general terms."
- Question* "Do you think that the Marxist critic has a theory of what literature is?" Justin inquired.
- Professorial Monologue** "Some do certainly," J.S. responded. "It's worth realizing that the Russians were not stupid people – Marx, Lenin, Engels were not stupid people – [they were] trying to figure out how to preserve the relation to the base but not [reduce it]... Literature is a product of the superstructure, it comes from someplace." He listed other Marxist axioms.
- He described a poor person refusing food stamps. "There would be a lot of ways to read that moment – an orthodox Marxist would say [?]... of course this is very crude and Marxism wouldn't have stayed around this long if it were so simplistic. There has to be some way to confront the complexity of the text."
- Textual Quotation** He read a poem called "Talking in bed" by Philip Larkin, as follows –
- Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far,
An emblem of two people being honest.
- Yet more and more time passes silently.
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,
- And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation
- It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.
- Interrogation/ Group Interpretation** "It should be honest and increasingly is not," a student observed. Margaret remarked, "at this very intimate moment these people are very isolated."
- Demand Interpretation...* " 'At that unique distance from isolation' " J.S. quoted – "what's that mean?" "That you're close to someone," someone said.
- "It seems to represent two contrasting views," Justin said, "and then it talks about another distance between [world and characters]."
- Demand* "What's the first signal that someone something's gone wrong with talking in bed?"
- Demand* " 'ought,' " Margaret pointed out a word.
- "What else?"
- Demand* " 'emblem' " she added.
- "What does the first line mean?"
- "It's easier to be intimate in bed," suggested one student.
- "The easiest thing to do in bed is talk," said another.
- Lucy observed the indifference of the people on the outside for the inside. I became too tired to pay careful attention.
- Demand* "What else goes on in the outside world, here, and how does it connect with the inside world?"
- Justin observed a parallel between the silence outside with the silence within.

- "It seems almost accelerated," said Lucy, "like time lapse."
- Demand* "So if it plays on the outside/inside distinction, are outside and inside in contrast, *like* each other, ..., ..., what's their relation?"
- "I think they're similar," said one student. "You're outside outside, if that makes sense." (There were soft laughs.)
- "What drugs are those?" teased the professor.
- "Because when you're inside you're outside outside," the student repeated.
- Prompt* "This says it's actually a kind of isolation..." said the professor. "Any other things you'd like to point out? Any other things that seem puzzling?"
- Nothing was said.
- Query* "To take up Jameson's *always historicize* what do we do?" asked J.S.
- "Look at the date," someone said.
- "What do you know about Larkin? What'd he do for a living? He was a librarian, a quiet librarian. What more can we do? What more can we see this poem doing to support ideology... you could see the poems as reinforcing individualism."
- Kidding* In a farcically grandiose tone of voice, one student said, "This poem undermines the center of production—the dark tones represent—the proletariat."
- "Since he's going back so far he's talking about the past," said another.
- Prompt* "You could go in any number of directions," J.S. said, "marriage, couples – it becomes natural because it's so old. What else can we see in this poem?"
- "... Even the word 'honest' – it's a very ideologically packed word – but what's honesty?" asked B.
- Clarification* "So, you're suggesting that it's ideologically produced in some way," J.S. said.
- "*Right* and also..." (I don't know what else B said).
- "I think a Marxist would ask who's oppressed by this and whose interests are served by this," J.S. suggested.
- "If they're being honest it means that I'm not oppressing?" B asked.
- "It makes you less likely to look closely at why people do things that are dishonest," D said.
- Clarification.* "Yeah, it installs a simplistic honest/dishonest binary," said J.S., "and I have to tell you some Marxists have said, when you cast things in moral terms, you support individualism – [you] obscure the social and economic terms."
- The class ended.

Genre structure and epistemic form

Interrogation, the dominant speech genre in this session, is structured according to the logic of "call and response": the professor is entitled to call and the students are supposed to respond. The professor's calls always take the form of questions (demands for statements about a particular text or theory), and responses tend to immediately follow the question. The professor always responds to the *students'* responses, and his responses often take the form of an evaluation: he either *authorizes* or *deauthorizes*, *approves of* or *disapproves of* the students' remarks. The pattern of discussion is thus: question, response, evaluation. I call it *interrogation* because the constant questioning runs parallel to a constant evaluation and judgment of the students' remarks.

The unique epistemic characteristic of interrogation is a strong focus on the performance of propositional knowledge transfer. Through interrogation, in a species of obligatory double-voiced discourse (cf. Bakhtin 1981:324), students are made to orient themselves towards a dialogic relation to the text, by performing the text's claims in their own voices. Yet this dialogic relation to the text is one that is carefully policed by the professor, who, we infer from the conversation above, constantly steers discourse towards a certain normative image of knowledge, one which valorizes correctness and truth, precision and accuracy, and systematic development of a theoretical system. Classroom discourse is made iconic of theoretical systems, and in part the double-voiced student recitation of knowledge is a polite way of ascertaining that students have assimilated the basic propositions of a given theory. Insofar as the implicit view of learning here is the transfer of discrete propositions to students, there is an interesting dissonance with many post-structuralists' claims to oppose traditional images of pedagogy and knowledge transfer (e.g. Johnson 1985, Felman 1982).

I should add that interrogation in the cultural studies class assumed quite a different form from interrogation in the case I examine here. Although the cultural studies professor did indeed try to elicit responses to pointed theoretical questions, she also permitted considerable variation from the original topic, and tolerated outright disagreement. One discussion of "subculture" became a discussion of the semiotics of airports and college campuses, for instance. At the same time, her students had great difficulty with the theoretical readings and frequently were not able to paraphrase the theoretical arguments. There is no guarantee of success, it seems, in attempts to make classroom discourse embody a given epistemic form.

Group interpretation is inaugurated by a professorial request to hear the students' own interpretations of texts; the students' comments are then moderated by the professor. Epistemically speaking, in contrast to interrogation, comments in this genre are valued primarily for being "interesting" or "insightful" rather than "correct." As one student, Justin, told me in an interview, you talk "to get your position out"; there is an emphasis on the individual "contribution," as it's sometimes termed. Hence, it seems that knowledge or "insight" is given *from students to the classroom as a whole*, rather than from professor to students — here it is as if the professor were *not* the sole source of knowledge. On the other hand, although there is certainly knowledge production by individuals, it is unclear whether students pay much attention to each other's interpretations. It sometimes seems group interpretation can become a *competition* between students for the accumulation of insight, in which one tries to say something "smart" and inwardly dismisses "stupid" comments made by one's classmates.

Professorial monologue is structurally simpler: the professor speaks while the students are silent. The topics of professorial monologues range widely: they may incorporate meta-commentary on the classroom, or they may give theoretical, interpretive, or merely didactic commentary that falls outside the scope of other more reciprocal genres. J.S. employed a monologue, for instance, in an attempt to explain the Marxist notion of ideology. Monologues display a unique focus on *completeness*: there are few points that are ever very exhaustively explained in classroom discourse, but monologues typically tend towards just such an exhaustion. They can go on for as long as the professor likes, and claims can therefore be qualified and refined to an arbitrarily great extent. No student gets so long a turn at talk.

Textual quotation or, colloquially, "reading aloud," is an activity, generally initiated by the professor, that focuses the class's collective attention on a given text immediately before them. If the professor does not read the text, as in the above example, then a student may be delegated to reading. In either case, the genre constitutes an impromptu performance in the

register of formal recitation. Textual quotations are generally drawn from literary or theoretical texts; students have copies of the printed text, and can follow along. The cultural studies class also looked at printed images or videos with much the same effect: to officially direct the group's attention to a given textual object. There is a strong formal separation between textual quotations and other more dialogic interactions. Paradoxically, this formal *separation* or framing seems to permit the students to *engage with* and interpret the text.¹⁵

Finally, in *student presentation*, one or two students lead discussion as if they were the professor. It occurs rarely; in the cultural studies class, two student presentations occurred on the last day of class, while in the literary theory class, students sometimes presented on particular theoretical texts or theoretically-grounded literary interpretations. They constitute an interesting mock inversion of social hierarchy, though students acquire neither professorial knowledge nor professorial authority. The professor occasionally speaks up in the middle, asking questions or "upgrading" student remarks. There is often awkwardness in demarcating the end of a student presentation: students sometimes lapse into silence and the professor will ask, "Anything else you wanna say?" In such moments, the discursive power of the professor is reiterated and hence renewed.

Metadiscourse and professorial power

The professor's practice of evaluating student remarks exemplifies a more general professorial privilege: a broad permanent control of metadiscourse. We could distinguish at least two types of classroom metadiscourse. First, there is discourse about the class *qua* class, as in J.S.' opening monologue (in which he criticized students' essay-writing styles), or in the episode in which J.S. tried to change the syllabus (see above). It is a retrospective, self-consciously reflexive evaluation of past classroom events. As such, it is quite different from metadiscourse about the present classroom discussion, which is unmarked and oriented towards the immediate future. The latter type of metadiscourse is exemplified by the professor's statements about discussion topics and transitions between topics: he is uniquely authorized to decide what to talk about and when to talk about it. It is the professor who, in the above discussion, requests a list of basic Marxian assumptions, and later shifts the discussion to Marxism's general assumptions about literature. To be sure, the course of discussion certainly depends on student response and uptake, discourse always being co-organized through reciprocal metapragmatic signaling (Silverstein 2003). Nonetheless, the professor uniquely enjoys the privilege of access to *explicit* meta-discourse: students never reflect publicly on the course of classroom events, nor do they ever explicitly shift the topic of discussion, as the professor does.

One particularly intriguing type of metadiscourse, especially noticeable during interrogation, is a professorial *rhetoric of progress* — striking because images of progress and linear knowledge have themselves often been problematized in theoretical circles (Johnson 1977). The image of progress is *explicit* in the professor's very first situating remark: he says, "I don't know *how far we'll get today in Marxism...*" The image of progress becomes apparent, here, through the likening of classroom discourse to a linear journey across theoryland, through a kind of spatial metaphor. Later, as the interrogation proceeds, the image of progress is visible but less explicit. For instance, in the question, "What other terms are missing?" the word 'other' plainly implies that the class has — so to speak — already covered a substantial amount of ground. The image of progress, then, serves to structure classroom discussion along an imagined linear trajectory, and perhaps to produce a sense of accomplishment at its endpoint. And, I would emphasize, it is possible for the professor to employ the rhetoric of progress *without reliably*

¹⁵ It is as if an object of interpretation must be unmistakably and formally marked as such.

knowing what, if anything, students have learned. Epistemologically speaking, one cannot infer that the class has collectively learned a theory from the fact that a few students have recited some of its propositions; *classroom practice and student learning are related only obliquely*, a fact which the rhetoric of progress serves to obscure.

If a general sense of "progress" is one way that professors signal their evaluations of classroom activity, a more fine-grained means of professorial evaluation is incarnated in a speech act that we may call an "upgrade." I refer to those moments when the professor follows a student remark by restating it in more precise, more academic, or more theoretical language; we might also call it a translation, or perhaps a transformation of verbal register.¹⁶ An example from above:

"It [the poem] makes you less likely to look closely at why people do things that are dishonest," D said.

"Yeah, it installs a simplistic honest/dishonest binary," said J.S., "and I have to tell you some Marxists have said, when you cast things in moral terms, you support individualism – [you] obscure the social and economic terms."

Here, the student's remark is made more abstract and is rephrased in a theoretical dialect. The connection between poem and reader ("it makes you...") is removed; the phrase "less like to look closely at why people do things" is replaced with the adjective "simplistic"; and the student's remark is made to refer to a particular *type* of theoretical operation ("installing a binary"), although it originally made no such reference. This *upgrading* speech act performs several social functions. First, it insinuates the superiority of theoretical dialect while quietly denigrating the student's own language. Second, in contrast, it teaches (or tries to teach) the student how to speak more theoretically, providing a sort of key to translation. Third, it serves an authoritative, censorial function in the organization of discourse. The upgrade is a subtle tool for integrating student's remarks into classroom conversation: the professor can, by "upgrading" student language, assimilate even idiosyncratic, off-topic, or badly articulated remarks into the melodies of official discourse. An apparent paraphrase is, thus, sometimes a means of *transforming* the locutionary force of a given student comment. In Bourdieuan terms (1991:137), the students' expressive interests are mediated, or even domesticated, by the censorial constraints of the discursive field they occupy; and in this mediation, the *upgrade* plays a key regulatory role.

Ambivalent ideologies of theory

Critiques of incomprehension and fantasies of knowledge

In analyzing academic culture, "knowledge" is the last thing we can take for granted, because "knowledge" is one of the most overdetermined, ideologically contradictory terms in academic discourse. In fact, in the university, knowledge itself becomes the object of intricate ideological machinations.¹⁷ And, in studying theory classes, it becomes apparent that knowledge, institutionally sanctified, is defined in part in opposition to *ignorance*, its profane negation. This symbolic opposition is mapped onto classroom social positions: professors are structurally defined as knowledgeable, while students are defined as ignorant. Here I want to examine ways that students and professors can take up positions on ignorance and knowledge, positions laden

¹⁶ I am grateful to Johanna Schoss for drawing my attention to this point.

¹⁷ The university's mission statement reads: "Cornell is a learning community that seeks to serve society by educating the leaders of tomorrow and *extending the frontiers of knowledge*." Here, a suitably nebulous official notion of knowledge brings a convenient order to the fractured knowledge practices separating the disciplines.

with sentiment and self-serving ideology. To begin with, I observed a tacit axiom that, in the classroom moral world, incomprehension¹⁸ is always blamed on the other, never the self. More specifically, while professors tend to cast students as incomprehending subjects, students are apt to see instead a set of intrinsically incomprehensible textual objects, or theoretical discourses. For instance, one theorist I met dismissed his students' ignorance as unimportant:

"Honestly, I don't know what they don't understand... they're afraid to say," he told me. "Do you care?" I asked him. "It's not what they think of theory," he said amusedly, "it's what theory thinks of them." I asked him what he meant. "If they don't [try to understand], then it's their fault... but theory already comprehends their position," he replied.

Paradoxically, this professor's ideology of knowledge becomes the condition of his own ignorance of his students. He dismisses incomprehension as a moral fault even as he claims that "theory" accounts "already" for resistance and incomprehension. (Theory, here, primarily means deconstruction, which was his own chief theoretical allegiance.) The paradox, of course, is that when we examine students, we see that they too tend not to find the cause of ignorance within themselves:

"Do you think she [the professor] understands how she's received?" I asked, having observed a great deal of miscommunication between students and teacher.

"You mean, that *we don't understand anything she says*?" asked Miranda.

"It should be a 300-level course," Simon answered with a sigh.

If they didn't understand, did they say so, I inquired?

"She has us whipped," said Simon. He had given up trying to articulate his positions in class, and later that day he would say so in public.

"Oh, I'll tell her that I don't understand," said Christy, "but her explanations [don't help]." She seemed to be equally frustrated and righteous.

For these students, *incomprehension is the outcome of a negotiation* with the professor, albeit an unsuccessful, unsatisfying one. Far from classifying themselves as ignorant, the students display a vivid sense of dismay at what they see as the professor's failure to make herself understood, and at the dynamics of classroom power. 'She has us whipped,' so we no longer complain, according to Simon's logic, which contains a clear note of moral condemnation. And for students, while incomprehension becomes an object of despair and rejection, understanding becomes an *object of attachment*. Students devote equal amounts of expressive labor to articulating their wish for *clarity* and the desire for understanding — and their moral condemnations of clarity's absence:

Mark (literary theory): "Barbara Johnson – I read clearer. It was a breath of fresh air – period. Because it was sooo lucid. I wish we read it first."

Miranda (cultural studies): "I really liked Dick Hebdige. I didn't really understand Barthes' point until I read it. It clarified it." "Dick Hebdige, I love him." *Of her class*: "Whenever I walked out, I was unclear on whatever I was supposed to learn."

Tim (advanced literary theory student): "Barthes – writing is unnecessarily unclear. Derrida – doesn't put any effort in putting his message across to the reader. Kant – it's

¹⁸ I view ignorance, incomprehension, and misunderstanding as three permutations of the same epistemic category: incomprehension is basically the sustenance of one's ignorance in spite of one's efforts to learn, while misunderstanding is ignorance that's tragically misrecognized as understanding.

irresponsible. I don't see the point in putting the burden on the reader."

I might add that "clarity" derives from the metaphor in which knowledge is light: clarity is *transparency of meaning* or ease of comprehension. The puzzling fact is not simply that students desired and valued understanding, for the institutional metanarrative of "knowledge" is widely spread and widely internalized. Rather the strange fact is that clarity, when it is articulated, is a strikingly absolute value: it seems to be a demand — an impossible demand — for *complete* understanding, for knowledge that is closed and non-refracted.

At other moments, students — particularly the less advanced ones — articulated their sincere *desires* for understanding:

Syd (literary theory) *on why classroom discussion is bad*: "We really want to understand the material — and don't. J.S. doesn't realize we don't get it. He's waiting for us to affirm that we get it, but we don't get it so we don't talk."

Justin (literary theory): "Sparkling your brain to get aligned with that theory at first is what's hard... You have to change what you expect, look at it in a different way."

Miranda (cultural studies): "I talk about it to Simon a lot, how I wish I could understand what the readings are trying to portray."

Dana (cultural studies): "It's hard for students to say [in class] we don't understand."

It surprised me that students were so forthright about their desire for understanding while feeling that it would be impermissible to express this publicly in class. These feelings were no doubt reinforced by professors' failures to soothe feelings of incomprehension when they *were* expressed. At any rate, students' desires to understand, combined with their valuation of clarity, seem to reproduce exactly the academic sacralization of knowledge. In this case, they are also linked to a particular classroom *language ideology*. In short, students articulate the position that the achievement of clear reference and comprehensible propositional content are the natural ends of classroom language and of classroom knowledge practice. It is as if they believed there would be *power in knowing the words themselves*, and if this is a seemingly "magical" theory of language, then it is one that forms in quite prosaic institutional circumstances.¹⁹ The students' *wishes* for knowledge, of course, correspond to their perceptions of the apparently inherent potency in theoretical language. I would call these desires for clarity *knowledge fantasies*, because *they are only expressed* (in my experience) *when they are unrealized*. They are the beliefs of the dominated in the face of the dominating party, of students faced with the foreign theoretical field. One can only guess, of course, about the origin of these knowledge fantasies, but I imagine they are at the very least reinforced by the knowledge ideologies of American primary and secondary education.

All the same, these desires are felt with an undeniable ambivalence:

"If I knew what to say I'd talk," said one female student before class one day.

"I leave this class every day... hating myself," another female added.

"I hate to say it, but literary theory is a farce," said a male student named Max.

"I think people who talk about farce are themselves farcical," Tim replied.

"I think the biggest example of academic masturbation—is literary theory... I'll—deconstruct them all," Max said melodramatically.

¹⁹ The philosopher Hilary Putnam, in "Brains in a Vat," inaccurately ascribes "magical theories of reference" to "primitive people" (1982).

"It's just really abstract and doesn't go anywhere," a theory student said in the hall.
 "Can I go home now?" another one reenacted her thoughts from class.
 "I always feel eeeaaa after professor Baker's class," added another.

To acknowledge these comments is to acknowledge that knowledge fantasies coexist with statements of frustration, resignation, and even desire for pure avoidance. Students' wishes for successful epistemic exchange are parallel to their disappointment with its nonappearance. It is as if knowledge is something one never quite has, or altogether securely has; and subjectively speaking, this permanently unfinished situation has to be coped with and interpreted. And, as I now want to show in more detail, these affective, ideological stances apply not just to one's relation to knowledge and ignorance, but also to one's position in the theoretical field at large, to others, and to theory itself. These stances are themselves dependent on one's social position, but are not directly determined by them; there are many strategies for transforming an objective social position into a subjective sense of self and world. In the following analysis, I will assume that introductory theory classes, far from being a species of undergraduate education with no professional function, in fact allow students to become "legitimate peripheral participants" (Lave and Wenger 1991) in the theoretical field, to practice theory as junior initiates.

Top-down morality

"It was a terrifically disappointing experience," said Professor J.S., looking sick in his office a week after classes had ended. He spoke of his class the previous year, in which his students were good and he had given thirteen A+s. They were not only smart but also engaged in the material, he said. This year, though, his students had stopped asking questions; when they gave presentations, they were "very passive," he told me. They lacked tolerance of uncertainty, and they rejected criticism and theory. He parodied their attitudes towards theory, putting in their mouths the mocking phrase, " 'We just have to find the noumenon.' "²⁰

At one point, he had tried to change the syllabus. Much to my surprise, he explained this by saying, "I was trying to save myself the pain" — the pain of two months with a recalcitrant class. He said he thought that the students were "stung by this — they didn't want to give up. They didn't want *another* surprise."

"Some of the hard wasn't productive," he said of his assigned readings. Still, he said, "I *did* find a lot of passivity." He added, "They weren't textually focused on criticism."

What made the material hard for the students, I asked him.

"Rhetoric, in the deconstructive case," he said, and added, "the metacritical mode seems hard for them."

I continue to find it touching that J.S. admitted his own genuine dismay with the way his class went. It had not occurred to me, given what I perceived as his authoritative classroom posture, that he might have taken it so personally. Yet the curious companion of his depth of feeling is an insistence on the moral faults of the students: he finds passivity, intolerance of uncertainty, lack of textual focus, and a lack of predisposition towards the "metacritical mode." Bourdieu and Passeron write that "university exchange is a gift exchange in which each partner grants the other what he expects in return, the recognition of his own gift" (1979:58); though their formula is only an ideal at best, here it is as if the professor perceives his students as having *rejected the gift of theory* (Martínez-Alemán 2007, Falcone n.d.). It seems peculiar, as I said earlier, that he is hurt by his students' passivity, and surely there are psychological individualities that I need not

²⁰ I gather that he meant to mock his class' desire for intuitive, unproblematized meaning and interpretation.

explain. Even so, the social precondition of his position can be simply stated: his attachment to theory and particularly to *engagement* with theory follows from his own position as a professional theorist. He seems to act in the certain belief that theory is a valuable knowledge, and his certainty of its value is a privilege and product of his status as a fully authorized practitioner.

I spoke to Kathryn for two hours on a bench overlooking Ithaca, and by the end of our conversation the sun had set and we were both frigid. She was an assertive and relatively fluid speaker, and she gave long answers to the questions I posed.

Speaking of the readings from the previous year, she said, "Lacan was on my last nerve – I prefer to blame that on Lacan." A minute later, she came back to the topic: "Some of it" – i.e., the difficulty – "is the style, especially Lacan. Just the sentence structure gets really complex the closer they get to their point." "Wittgenstein was impossible," she added.

Some time later in the conversation, I asked her, why don't people understand the readings?

"People tend to skim the readings - if you skim it you won't get it," she said. She followed this by saying, "People are genuinely not willing to add their own ideas to theory. [They] just bash it. They're not willing."

After this, I was led to asking her why she was a better literature student than her classmates.

"Subtlety isn't my strong suit," she began by saying, and then answered, "Because I'm suited for the analytical study of literature and have a wider base of knowledge than others."

Kathryn was a student of J.S. who had already taken a different introductory theory class the year before. She was what I would call an "advanced" theory student, able to cite theorists who had influenced her academic work, a member of the economy of theoretical citation and engagement. (She mentioned Judith Butler and Foucault, I believe.) An interesting split is evident in her analysis of incomprehension: *in her own case*, it is blamed on the authors of texts (Lacan, Wittgenstein). But *in the case of other students*, she blames incomprehension on their failure to read carefully and their un-"willing"-ness to pay attention to theory. This possibly unconscious effort to distinguish herself *morally* from her classmates is a strategy that, I think, follows from her precarious position as a barely-authentic theory initiate: she has come to feel that theoretical knowledge is a valuable good, but is not yet in a position to take her possession of theory for granted. Therefore she must explicitly attempt to distinguish herself from other undergraduates, as manifested in her propensity to moralize about others' incomprehension, and also in her blunt remark that she's naturally "suited for the analytical study of literature."

Bottom-up resentment

Two days before, I had met with Miranda, from cultural studies, in a crowded and unpleasant campus café.

"You can't express disagreement. She bombards us with her opinion," said Miranda of her professor. She sounded as righteous and indignant as ever.

Does it make sense how she teaches, I asked?

"No!" she said indignantly. She gave the example of the second essay: "I had good notes on what a good paper was – and I got a B minus. Her comments are confusing, and unclear. She's very stuck in her ways, and can't understand [our point of view]."

"When I see signs, [I] think about why they're there²¹... but I don't know how to use any of the big words. I just find them useful for getting As."

"I liked the reading but not the discussion. Whenever I walked out, I was unclear on anything we were supposed to learn. And the other students were unclear, which is pretty sad. I get Cs."

I asked her, "Are you mad?"

"I work very hard," Miranda told me in response, "and I'm not a bad writer by any means."

Do you ask the professor for help, I asked.

Miranda said, yes, she had been to her office hours. The professor had advised her to try reading the assignments out loud. "That's *bullcrap!*" exclaimed Miranda. "Whenever I go to her office hours," she said, in a frustrated tone, "she doesn't explain, and she doesn't give direction for future work."

"I try to listen," she said. "I often find myself in disagreement. She doesn't understand or doesn't want to understand [what people say to her]. It's very comforting to know that I'm not the only one who's clueless."

"I talk about it to Simon a lot, how I wish I could understand what the readings are trying to portray." Do you think it's like learning a different language, I asked. "I guess I pick and choose what I want to learn. Economic power structure... wasn't very useful to my daily life."

Miranda is just like the professor J.S., insofar as both are dismayed, even depressed, with their respective classrooms, and both have accompanying strong feelings of blame. Except that the roles are reversed: Miranda is a *student*, and she correspondingly blames her *professor* (E.R.) for incomprehension. Miranda is unlike J.S. in that she explicitly tries to represent *herself* as morally unquestionable: "I work very hard, and I'm not a bad writer by any means," she says. However, a curious parallel is their shared insistence on something like the "will to ignorance" (Banta 1980) ascribed to the target of blame. J.S. insists on his students' passivity as if it were an active force, and Miranda says outright, "[E.R.] doesn't understand *or doesn't want to understand*." Such claims seem to be a part of the moralizing political and rhetorical strategy that J.S. and Miranda use to explain unpleasant classroom situations — a strategy in which moral virtues are ascribed to the self while bad ones are ascribed to one's apparent opponents.

Miranda's social position is, of course, not altogether a simple inversion of J.S.' position. She situates herself in relation to the university's generalized pedagogical system, rather than a specific theoretical field, saying that "big words" are only "useful for getting As." In fact, she is unusual in relating the classroom to her life as a whole, and it is in this context that she expects the terminology to be useless. In spite of this assertion of independence, though, her wish for good grades reveals an institutional determination of desire, insofar as her desire for good grades is a product of the institutional structures of student evaluation that render grades *meaningful*. There is a kind of contradiction between her feelings of independence and her simultaneous conformance to institutional norms, as there is also a contradiction between her devaluation of theoretical material and her parallel wish to "understand what the readings are trying to portray."

Career-oriented pragmatism

"The lectures were boring — kind of useless if you read and relatively understood the readings. [Maybe they were useful] if you were stupid or didn't read carefully..." said Sarah.

²¹ The cultural studies course devoted much effort to the analysis of "signs," following the model of Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972).

"So did the theoretical texts make you think everything was meaningless?" I asked eventually.

"I never read them that way," she said. "It *did* change the way I think about everything. Just looking back at my sophomore papers, asking how can one person [determine meaning]..."

"When you write a paper," I asked, "what do you write about?"

"I write about the thing that I understand the best and have things to say about," Sarah replied.

"I have a lot of the same interests [as before]," said Sarah, "but I have a lot more sophisticated way of talking to them – more *nuanced*. I was very concerned about the process of making sense..."

We talked a bit about the sometimes mystifying words used in theoretical writing. "Do you think people pick terms solely for utility?" I asked eventually.

"I think they're picked for utility and accuracy," said Sarah, "and if they're not the same thing there's probably something wrong."

"Do you speak the language or does the language speak you?" I asked.

"I try to speak the language," she answered with a brief hesitation. "I'm very aware that you could get caught up in jargon. It's important to remain lucid and not write like Judith Butler."

I asked if, having read Derrida, she still felt that lucidity was an unproblematic value.

"I've always had a pragmatic approach to all this," she replied. "I'm interested in trying to understand what others have thought and communicating... Derrida – does word substitution, and that seems motivated."

Sarah was an advanced theory student, writing an honors thesis when I spoke to her. Unlike Tim, she calls theory a tool rather than a revolutionary experience: in her "pragmatic approach," theory is a "way of talking to" her interests. Theoretical categories are only partially internalized, it seems. I was actually disappointed, at first, to encounter such a calm, reasonable attitude towards theory. It seems, though, that this apparently peaceful attitude is paralleled by a rather silent naturalization of the value of theory and of the social coordinates of the theoretical field. This naturalization is most visible, I think, in her perception that learning theory confers a "more sophisticated" or "nuanced" perspective on the existing world. (The implication is that *she* herself has become more sophisticated.) This valuation of theory is *pragmatic*, I think, only and precisely when success in the theoretical field is the goal: her "pragmatism" is therefore the very specific pragmatism of an elite college student bound for graduate school in a theoretical field, bound for confirmation as a professional literary scholar. And her comments on the uselessness of classroom lectures, made at the start of the interview, display the disdain towards confused beginners that I suggest is typical of the semi-initiated.

Theory as revolution

Tim had taken a well-known introductory literary theory class, taught in a lecture format, that I had taken myself two years earlier. We met one day around noon; he smoked a cigarette as we spoke, and began by saying that quitting smoking was a frame for life.

"The course changed me completely," he said, "– reading, writing, thinking, speaking, my whole approach to literary studies. It was incredibly difficult – not the concepts but the implications for the limitations of language."

He found no benefit in the "formal teachings," that is, the lecture and discussion sections, but was changed by the readings and by thinking about them. He told me a story about the first day of discussion section:

"Everyone wanted to know, what the hell is Derrida doing? Does he just say it means nothing? Well, the TA said I don't know... [so it becomes a] personal battle between you and the readings."

Did the professor help, I asked.

"There's no way to lay down a frame [around theory]," said Tim, and added that the professor didn't even really want to do that. I went on and asked him about particular reading assignments.

"I got very little out of the sequence on the Purloined Letter," he said. "I thought they were just playing a game – a self-serving self-gratifying game of wit... Derrida is not really telling you anything, he's just problematizing everything. He doesn't tell you anything – just says all previous interpretations are wrong."

"They release your mind from social constructions, and leave you with nothing," said Tim, "and it's up to you to put it back together." He drew a contrast between the first half of the class, which took things apart, and the second, in which Judith Butler and Foucault presented more positive arguments. I asked him, then, if he had applied deconstructive methods to Foucault or Judith Butler.

"I was so thrilled," he replied, "to have the possibility of things meaning something again that I took Foucault and Judith Butler at face value."

I asked him what the effects of the class had been afterwards.

"There's an extended awareness at the level of the signifier – of words, and images, of how language means," he replied. "You're very aware of the frame."

"There's a lot of despair," he said, "you start to question your own context. Your whole life may be some kind of" – and he paused for a second – "*construct*." He distinguished human from animal knowledge; animal knowledge, he said, "like a squirrel: I'm gonna bury these fuckin' nuts and I don't know why I'm doing it." In human knowledge, he said, you know why you're doing it – but then theory problematizes the difference.

"It's better to know than not to know," Tim said later. "Ignorance is not bliss, it's just ignorance."

Theory here provides not only a revolutionary experience but also a set of internalized cosmological categories that organize daily life.²² Susan Harding writes, "Conversion transfers narrative authority—the Holy Spirit—to the newly faithful as well as the wherewithal to narrate one's life in Christian terms" (2000:34) and one need only adjust a few words to fit the case at hand perfectly. The intimate quality of his conversion narrative is accompanied by a striking *rejection* of the effects of professor or classroom, that is, a rejection of *social* mediation: he says he found no benefit in the formal teachings, and suggests that the teacher didn't want to be too effective since theory is intrinsically unframeable.²³ He does not, however, hesitate to apply social standards of evaluation to the writing styles of various theorists, calling a Lacanian text "a self-serving self-gratifying game of wit." In his moralistic view of incomprehension and misunderstanding, he tacitly accepts the knowledge ideology of the university: "It's better to know than not to know," he says simply, unproblematically. And yet this unproblematic

²² Dominic Boyer, an elite, theoretically-trained American academic, writes, "I never would have imagined the need to live my life *post-structurally* in order to gain anything from the texts" (2001:208-9): I would observe that, here, Tim seems to see himself as doing just that.

²³ Boyer has already observed the sacralizing effect of such 'trans-contextual' sentiments (2001:210).

knowledge is all the same deeply mediated by texts. It is this textual mediation that I now want to explore.

The text-fetish

As a matter of empirical fact, texts are central to classroom practice: they are read and written, discussed and recited, interpreted and criticized. *Why, then, are texts so important?* I believe that they are more than a contingent instrumental means for fulfilling pedagogical ends. Rather, they become a focal point of the social order, a collective fetish.

Classroom discourse, as I have already said, is most often *about* a particular text. The first sign of the text's ideological centrality is that this discursive orientation towards texts becomes a common *ethic*. If students feel that they aren't properly discussing the day's text, they may become testy. One night at a party, a student told me, "There wasn't enough attention to *texts* in Professor F's class – isn't that what an English class is *for*?" Another student said disapprovingly that deconstruction leads to "an almost total ignorance of the text itself." Yet another student said of her oral presentation, "I wanted to explicate the poem, not pretend to be Brooks [a literary theorist]." What is displayed in these remarks is an internalized ethical attachment to text-centered discourse. For some students, this rises to the level of self-consciousness:

"Terms like the signifier – they totally become reified," said Sarah. "The idea that you can speak of the text is a weird idea. If you talk about texts that's a very different thing from talking about the text."

What I want to argue is that texts can be fetishized, not only at the level of terminology, but also at the level of social practice. As we know, theory classroom discourse, though having a plurality of functions, is centrally a method of producing knowledge. However, this constant textual orientation of this knowledge constitutes an *alienation of participants' own power to produce knowledge*: knowledge production becomes *text dependent*. It is felt that, without the proper orientation towards texts, without a proper indexical relation between class discourse and text, valid critical knowledge cannot be produced. Like Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, in which "the definite social relation between men themselves... assumes... the fantastic form of a relation between things" (1977:165), in the classroom, the social relation and in particular the epistemic relations between participants assume the form of a *relation with texts*. Indeed, the more thoroughly one's knowledge is based on texts, the better the knowledge. As in prayer, as Sangren describes it, "the more complete and sincere the alienation, the more efficacious the response" (2000:174). Concomitantly, in these classes, a careful consideration of the text, and thus a "more complete" alienation, is an index of epistemic quality. As one professor told me, a critical analysis is "terrible" "if it doesn't seem nuanced, never trying to see the other side," and problematic readings are those that are "too obvious, too pedestrian." Note that he did not exalt any particular style of criticism, but rather valued the very complexity of one's engagement with the text at hand. Following Sangren, we may view this as an alienated form of knowledge production, but a productive one: the illusion and norm that knowledge-making must be text-mediated make for immense productivity in classroom discussion, setting the stage for a wealth of possible conversations.

Of course, it is not as if anyone explicitly denies that texts are human products, or that knowledge is ultimately a product of human practice and not of texts in themselves. The point, however, is not that anyone theoretically denies the social origins of texts, but that texts are fetishized in practice, insofar as *texts* are the ubiquitous *pretext* for classroom social production.

It is a *practical* precondition of classroom practice that there must be a text to "ground" discourse. True fetishism is not in word but in deed, as Zizek (1989) has vigorously argued.

And yet the practice of text fetishism can take unexpected turns and even fetishism can be alienating. Consider this debate in the cultural studies classroom, in which students challenged their professor on her tendency to analyze advertisements as cultural texts:

"When you bring these ads in and tear them apart— do you ever *like* any of these ads?" asked Christy.

"What do you *mean* tear them apart! I like these ads. These are very clever ads," said E.R.

"Do you think the ads are *stronger* because of the way you interpret them?" Christy asked. E.R. didn't answer. Perhaps she didn't understand the question, so Christy asked instead, "How do you pick the ads?"

E.R. answered that she chose them based on the topics that the class was looking at. "It's very dangerous to live the way I do," she said presently. "You go to Wegman's²⁴ and – stand in the pets aisle – [thinking about the semiotics of advertising]."

"I think it's dangerous for other reasons," muttered Christy.

"You've lost your communicative innocence — you're semiotic readers now," E.R. exclaimed.

Later on, as the class discussed the semiotics of airports, Simon commented pointedly on the whole debate. "Well on the plane you're just a crazy lady ripping out ads but here [people burst out laughing] ...there's a veil of authority behind it," Simon said.

"Could we get back to my question about ideology – 'ideology saturates everyday discourse in the form of common sense,'" E.R. requested, and the class carried on with its theoretical exegesis...

Here we observe a controversy over a teacher's effort to cast ads (and other forms of popular culture) as *texts*, where a 'text' is an object open to academic forms of semiotic and ideological interpretation (Barthes 1972, Hall 2001). It appears that students experience the teacher's effort to make ads into interpretable texts as a peculiar form of *destruction*, a form of "tearing apart," a form of not "liking," a form of being "crazy." Unlike the literary theory class, where a text-centered pedagogy was more fully internalized by the students, here students openly express doubt and bewilderment. In fact, Simon's comment reveals a clear consciousness of the force of academic power lying beneath these peculiar interpretive practices: "here," in the classroom if not in the street, "there's a veil of authority behind it," he correctly observes. Yet the teacher never really acknowledges these critiques of her classroom practice; it is as if they are incomprehensible to her, as if it is impossible to imagine that her well-intentioned counter-hegemonic project can itself become a form of local domination. And the irony is that, faced with an implicit ideological challenge, she ignores it by saying, "Could we get back to my question about ideology..." In short, though a certain amount of contestation can occur, the classroom's "veil of authority" can never be removed, so that even when students try to resist construing ads as cultural texts, the professor continues to insist on it. Even when text fetishism is not realized in practice, it persists as a professorial norm.

²⁴ Wegman's is a local grocery store.

The 'theoretical' implications

"When a myth reaches the entire community, it is from the latter that the mythologist must become estranged if he wants to liberate the myth." —Roland Barthes, "Myth Today."

The preceding analysis, needless to say, is not exhaustive; it is not, for instance, a complete analysis of individual worldviews, nor is it a detailed study of pedagogy and pedagogical content. It does have, however, a logical unity deriving from an underlying proposition, which is that any account of a social situation must fundamentally rest on an analysis of the emergent *social order* particular to that situation. This essay is, thus, an exploration of the classroom's social order, provisionally examined in terms of local norms, social strategies, and ideologies of knowledge-making. Insofar as the classroom's social order is the precondition of any educational processes — while educational processes are but one part of the classroom's functioning — it seems that an initial analysis like this one is the logical prerequisite of these further investigations.

But I cannot quite end with this neat picture of affairs. For an ethnography of theory poses an epistemological problem that cannot be wished away, even if I have written up until this point as if analysis was quite a transparent procedure. I should admit that I actually chose the project in part due to its intriguing recursive *aesthetic* quality — because I imagined it at the start as a *theory of theory*, and I was attracted to the pursuit of "reflexivity." And although I have not emphasized the reflexive dimension of the project so far, I want to end by considering its reflexive qualities and its implications for reflexive social research.

Theory — my object of study — itself provides varieties of reflexive knowledge. I was once greatly disturbed by the reflexivity of Barbara Johnson, the well-known deconstructive critic:

"The problem of how to *present* these three texts [written by Poe, Lacan and Derrida] is all the more redoubtable since each of them both presents itself and the others, and clearly shows the fallacies inherent in any type of "presentation" of a text. The fact that such fallacies are not only inevitable but also *constitutive* of any act of reading—also demonstrated by each of the texts—is small comfort, since the resulting injustices, however unavoidable in general, always appear corrigible in detail" (1977:458-9).

And earlier: "In the resulting asymmetrical, abyssal structure, no analysis—including this one—can intervene without transforming *and* repeating other elements in the sequence" (457).

I once took this passage as a kind of condemnation to unavoidable but self-conscious error, an interminable calling-into-question of any critical analysis and, by extension, of thought in general. My acceptance of the metaphor of the abyss led me to believe that this mode of reflexivity was quite unavoidable, as if the *same* spectre waited around *every* corner. I only later encountered critiques of such deconstructive, self-referential forms of reflexivity (e.g., Banta 1993:x; Boyer 2005, n.d.), as I became familiar with Bourdieu's reflexive social science. Bourdieu (1988, 1990) has proposed a sociological inquiry into the social preconditions of scholastic knowledge, arguing that without it, the scientist or intellectual is left blind to the biases of her or his own social position. Reflexive inquiry is conceived as a means to negate this bias and, ultimately, "to buttress the epistemological security of sociology" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:36). This too, though, has been criticized, recently by Sangren (2007), who suggested that a thoroughgoing reflexivity would violate the norms of etiquette that make possible a community of scholars, by the scholarly community's "systemic defences" (15) against a full unveiling of its own social practices. The cheerful reading is that reflexivity has its limits, but I think Sangren's point is that a thorough, genuine reflexivity is next to impossible. The

implication is that Bourdieu's style of reflexivity will always be severely limited in certain dimensions.

At any rate, this project owes a debt to Johnson to the extent that my erstwhile surrender to an image of the abyss of knowledge can be discerned in the foundations of the project – in fact, the project embodies one further step in the endless abyss of self-referential knowledge. However, at a less murky level, the project follows carefully in Bourdieu's footsteps, for it consists of an inquiry into the *social practice* of theory, which is reflexive precisely because it is a social analysis of theory performed *by a theory student*. Although I speak as if distant from my object of study, it surely is clear that I am myself a semi-initiated theory insider, even if my theoretical experience was not in the two particular classes I observed. Where I differ from Bourdieu is on the question of the epistemic benefits of reflexive socioanalysis: I am not sure that reflexive analysis necessarily provides academic knowledge with a more secure footing.

For the conclusion that can be drawn from my results is that the production of even reflexive theoretical knowledge entails a social *cost* that is exacted from the *students*. The theoretical field persists only insofar as it is able to produce *new* theorists, thereby reproducing itself as a whole. But the reproductive process begins at sites that are liminal in relation to the theoretical field, such as the introductory classes I observed. It is at these marginal sites that one can observe the start of the rites of "purification" — in which, as it were, some students are intellectually purified as theorists while others are turned away, alienated (often psychologically as well as socially) and discouraged from future theoretical endeavours. Let me be clear: I do not suggest that theory professors cunningly favor some students and reject others through consciously elitist processes of selection. Rather it seems that the process of selective purification is inherent in the social relations of the introductory theory classroom (as I observed it), in the forms of knowledge and value that are enacted there. And this process of selective purification warns against an unequivocally positive evaluation of reflexive knowledge. For the fact is that reflexive knowledge sometimes alienates rather than liberates, and in the case of the students I studied, it alienates more often than not. None of this negates Bourdieu's assessment of the epistemic benefits of reflexive inquiry, but it implies that these epistemic benefits may only come to those who are theorists *already*. And reflexive knowledge would seem to constitutively depend on alienation, insofar as it could not exist without introductory classes in which reflexivity has the effect of social purification or exclusion.²⁵

This project hence aims to remind us that theory must be analyzed as a process of *becoming* as well as *being*. It insists that theory is always constituted through its means of social reproduction, through the process of theoretical initiation, in which some, perhaps most, beginners are rejected by, and themselves reject, the theoretical field. It claims that the analysis of any given professional field must consider sites of reproduction that are apparently peripheral, but ultimately crucial to the field's functioning. It suggests that the social order of the classroom far exceeds the classroom's supposed functional role as a node of knowledge transmission, even as the (institutional) structures and (disciplinary) values of the classroom are largely determined from outside it. And it suggests that any future anthropology of universities, as well as any informed movement for academic reform, will have to account for the institution at large in the same moment as it accounts for the fine-grained social and semiotic complexity of everyday academic life.

²⁵ I cannot *prove* that social purification is inherent to the introductory theory classroom, but I have personally never encountered a theory class that failed to stratify its students, and I suspect that a large-scale quantitative study would confirm that social purification is endemic.

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