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Edited by John J. O’Keefe, Gina Merys, and Bridget Keegan

A Loss for Words

Sounding the Depth of What We Profess in College English

Vincent Casaregola, Saint Louis University

Self-Scrutiny

[1] “Settle thy studies, Faustus, and begin to sound the depth of that thou wilt profess” – so says Dr. Faustus, shortly before negotiating one of the more ill conceived academic contracts in history (Marlowe: 1.1.1-2). Certainly a bad precedent, but an effective warning for all in the professoriate who would take too much ego-centric pride in the power of their knowledge. Even though college English professors rarely seem to have much power and influence, we nonetheless may think of ourselves as having superior knowledge. And no matter how much or how little practical influence we may actually have, we are all subject to illusions that we are individually more important than the available evidence suggests. Each of us is vulnerable to making Faustian bargains, and so the foolish doctor reminds us of the

universal need for humility – a good place to start any consideration of a profession’s purpose and practices.

[2] So despite Faustus’s misguided example, we must still honestly explore the depth of our profession. What do we “profess,” what do we claim to accomplish, whether in the university itself or in the wider culture? These questions underlie all academic work, even though we may ask them infrequently because we become so deeply engaged in the complex activities of our particular disciplines, and so driven by the need to appear successful in the eyes of colleagues, peers, and administrators. Career advancement, however measured, eventually seems its own self-justifying purpose. But ignore them as we may, the questions remain. They have relevance for all institutions of higher learning, but particularly for those, like Catholic colleges and universities, that identify themselves as grounded in a religious tradition. As a scholar, a teacher, and a member of a university community, what are the fundamental ends toward which I work, and what does it mean to participate in and follow a “Catholic Intellectual Tradition”?

[3] In asking myself to explore these questions, I face my own need for humility. I teach college English, and I study and write about a number of diverse subjects under this rather general title that may alternatively identify many different aspects of language, literature, culture, and communication. Both by chance and by choice I do all of this at a Catholic, Jesuit university, having had the good fortune to have been offered a job at Saint Louis University over 18 years ago, and having made the choice to accept that offer and not others then or since. I am also a practicing Catholic, by chance and by choice – having been born and raised in a Catholic family, and after having “left the Church” as a young adult, choosing to return – though I do not hold myself as a particularly good example of spiritual achievement. Although I have some experience on which to draw, I do not profess to be an expert on being Catholic, much less on the nature of Catholic higher education. In relation to the old concept of a “Church Militant,” I am a merely one of the vast cadre of buck privates. As a Catholic educator, I am one of many individual workers, not someone who develops major institutional practices or policies. Moreover, I find myself to be a rather idiosyncratic representative of my own discipline. I speak largely from my own experience, although my attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and values do derive from some sense of community with others. In short, though I cannot speak for the discipline as a whole, I hope to speak from within the discipline.

[4] When I claim the title of “college English professor,” those listening might envision anything from a guardian of grammatical rectitude, to a tweed-bound exponent of some very old books, to a very trendy if arcane advocate for any number of obscure theories of how what we say, hear, write, or read does not really mean what it appears to mean, or perhaps means nothing at all. The easy stereotypes pop up like clip-art files from a computer’s standard office program, bearing just enough resemblance to at least some actual figures in the discipline that there is little likelihood that the stereotypes will fade. Moreover, I am sure that I am guilty of living down to such stereotypes occasionally.

[5] Some thirty-five years ago, looking at a college catalog, I stopped and reflected on a photograph of an English professor – he was a dark-haired and slightly bearded fellow, thirty-something, wearing a tweed sport coat, and energetically engaged in discussion with a

student while walking across an idyllic college quad. Somehow that image caught my naïve imagination, and perhaps it was then that I subconsciously began to transform myself into the character I conceived that man might be. More than fifteen years later, at my first university teaching job, I was leaving an old campus building on a spring afternoon when I caught my reflection in the darkened glass of the exit door – I suddenly recalled that catalog photograph and realized that I had evolved, at last, into someone resembling the image. I laughed to myself, however, realizing that what I may have shared most with the man in that photo, besides the surface appearances, were the feelings of uncertainty, fear, and frustration that the image did not wish to represent. Perhaps like the *Velveteen Rabbit*, I had become “real” in some sense, only to realize that, like rabbits, college professors spend a good deal of time scurrying from place to place in search of what keeps them alive and in fear of what might harm them.¹ Still, even the most skittish of us does pause occasionally to reflect on what we are doing and why.

[6] At the heart of all my work is my interest in the “rhetorical tradition,” and by this I mean the more than 2,500-year-old intellectual, educational, and cultural practices of artistic, social, and political discourse. Encompassed within these practices are not only the expected areas of rhetorical engagement of the public sphere and the practical communication of business and professional life, or the fundamental philosophical discourses that frame our understanding and engagement with language and culture, but all discourses “great and small,” if you will. All forms of literature are included within this range, and while not attempting to reduce literature to being merely an entertaining means of persuasion, I would emphasize that my own approach to literature is fundamentally concerned with rhetoric. By rhetoric, a term so often disparaged by the addition of the adjective “mere,” I mean the basic human activity of communicating experiences, ideas, and beliefs, as well as the attempt to achieve a shared understanding, however fragile and contingent, of those experiences, ideas, and beliefs. At its best, the practice of rhetoric is the art of becoming one with each other through the powers of language – a kind of verbal sacrament.

[7] I would like to claim that I have, through long labor and deep thought, achieved some powerful insight. What I seem to have, instead, are memories and stories – my own as well as those of my discipline. Actually, these are only fragments of stories, recollections of moments when meaning seemed clear for an instant, when the pieces held together and the puzzle was whole, and where the words came together simply but powerfully, resonant with meaning, suggesting some definitive closure beyond my grasp. But the moments fade, and what I can recall or transcribe from them seems, in retrospect, but an echo of the meaning I had felt.

[8] So be it, if merely fragments and faint echoes are all I retain, then with them I will tell what story I may, though it will not be seamless or eloquent.

Finding, Losing, and Finding Words

[9] We begin in words – in the discovery of language and the language of discovery, a joyful noise that arises in celebration of the word. We know it as young children, in the pure

¹ *The Velveteen Rabbit* is Margery Williams’ children’s classic about “how toys become real.”

physicality of sound as resonant energy on the tongue and teeth, in the rolling rhythms of speech and the calm potential of silence, in the restless choreography of gesture and signing, and eventually in all the multiplicity of shapes, symbols, and letters on the page. For all the repetitious drill of schooling, and all the pragmatic drudgery of the world of work, we never lose the potential to find pleasure in language, especially in whatever forms it touches us most intimately. We are creatures of this sea of language, so accustomed to its motions that we often think about it only when we hit some hidden barrier or foreign current that forces us to reconsider what seems so natural an environment. As we struggle to overcome such barriers, we may seem to forget everything but whatever goal we currently pursue, and the painful struggle to achieve it. That forgetfulness, however, is only momentary, and despite such challenges, we still retain, subconsciously at least, the childlike joy of words.

[10] Take this as a starting point, a motive and a means at once, which propels some of us to spend our time in the study and teaching of language. It can be any language, but in the time and place of my particular experience, it just happens to be English. College-level work in language appeals to those of us who want to study in greater depth and teach at a more sophisticated level (though not a more significant or important level, since the most important language teaching concerns those in the first decade of life). So we come to the place of the English department, as it currently exists at colleges and universities across the country. What is it that we do, as scholars and as teachers, and why do we do it?

[11] Read the mission statements and catalog copy, and it seems that English departments have not really changed their fundamental purposes for most of the past century. We still claim to study how the language works, especially the written language, particularly as it exists in literatures that date back many centuries (about fifteen hundred years) and now also extend across numerous nations and cultures throughout the contemporary culture of global English. We also claim to study the workings of written language in all its aspects, from the most avant-garde poetry to the most pragmatic political or professional discourse. Likewise, we teach all of these subjects, while also studying how to teach them, since inherent in the study of language is the study of language pedagogy. Thus, scholarship and teaching in our discipline are linked in ways that make them almost inseparable.

[12] What is achieved by such study and teaching? Again the mission statements and catalogs give us some indications. Supposedly, we study language in order to understand its complex structures both theoretically and pragmatically. We also teach our students to understand and employ the fundamental principles of language in a full range of social and cultural contexts, especially as they express themselves in writing (since English departments are generally responsible for college-level writing instruction). In the process, we explore everything from comprehensive rhetorical strategies to the editorial details of constructing clear sentences. In short, we teach writing so that students might better understand their ideas by expressing them in writing, and that by continual work at writing, they might make those ideas more understandable to others.

[13] Despite our basic commitment to the study and teaching of writing, however, most of our labor as scholars and teachers is still focused on literature. Again, if you check mission statements and catalogs, you will note our claims that studying literature helps us achieve a better understanding of both ourselves and others, and that through such understanding we

might live more productive, meaningful, just, moral, and peaceful lives. These claims are quite old, and yet they persist, continuing to underlie virtually everything we describe when explaining our work as scholars and as teachers to a general public (i.e., people who pay the tuition or support the grant-giving foundations).

[14] In many other ways, however, our departments have indeed changed. Most importantly, we have vastly expanded the range of what we study and the approaches we take to that study. A careful comparison of course descriptions from 1960 and today would reveal major differences in the subject matter studied in English departments. This change is largely one for the better. Though some traditional canonical writers, once cherished, have now slipped into the background, English departments still retain a wide array of the same writers found in the older canon, but they have also enriched that list with so many other writers whose work had once been ignored. For most of the history of English departments (a little more than a century, really), the study of language and literature was limited by a range of explicit and implicit biases rooted in class, gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors. These biases often blinded scholars to literary and cultural discourses that only recently have begun finding a place in academic study. Thus, we can see healthy growth in English departments, reflecting our society's more robust understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity. (Of course, one might argue that society has changed English departments more than the departments have changed society, but we rarely acknowledge that we are not the driving force behind most important social changes.)

[15] Other theoretical changes in our discipline, though quite exhilarating, have been more problematic, as we have experienced a series of "paradigm shifts" in our fundamental principles that have left us without a prevailing theoretical model. To understand these changes, we must first examine a very long history, which I will try to summarize as briefly as possible. Since the ancient Greco-Roman era, the study of language and literature in the Euro-Mediterranean tradition has drawn on philosophy as a guide for understanding the underlying nature of language, the processes of interpretation, and the ethical and political implications of all discourse. Additionally, the study and teaching of the "language arts" (a term I borrow from elementary school curricula but one which may be more apt to the full range of our study) was the province of rhetoric, and literary discourse was merely one sector of that province. What we now refer to as "literary theory" really began in the meta-discourse about language that evolved in the dialogue between philosophers and rhetoricians. (As author of both a *Poetics* and a *Rhetoric*, Aristotle proved himself to be one early figure who could apparently manage that dialogue within the confines of his own mind.) Of course, the poets, dramatists, and other artists of words – some working in oral traditions, some in writing, and some in both – went on with their creative work regardless of how academics attempted to understand and interpret their efforts (as literary writers still do today, thankfully). Obviously, the philosophical and rhetorical traditions of which I speak long pre-date the existence of English departments; indeed, they pre-date the existence of universities and of the English language itself. Still, they form a substantial part of the intellectual history from which our contemporary discipline evolved.

[16] Another important component of studying language and literature in the Judeo-Christian tradition has been the concern with religious belief. A religious history that grows from a powerful sense of language as God's gift, this tradition has long concerned itself with

the study of written scriptures, as well as with the written commentaries and reflections on those scriptures. The hermeneutic processes necessary for studying God's revealed word naturally served as a guide for interpreting all discourses in a society dedicated to religious belief. Conversely, the form of scripture itself, with its elegant poetry and intricate narratives, showed an almost divine confirmation of the power of literary form – if God chose to inspire writers to reveal divine meaning through literary constructs, then by extension, even secular literature might have some potential religious significance. The hermeneutic enterprise that has propelled so much textual analysis across many centuries consistently blends a search for divine meaning with both the practical and aesthetic examination of writing, eventually producing most of our basic approaches to literary analysis and interpretation. Thus, all our interpretive efforts, no matter how distant from such religious concerns, are still influenced in some way by this drive to understand some kind of transcendent meaning.

[17] During those centuries in European history some still call the “Renaissance” and others prefer to label the “Early Modern Period,” these multiple traditions helped to influence the development of the humanist tradition – an amalgam of intellectual and cultural practices that attempted to integrate the philosophical, rhetorical, and religious/hermeneutic traditions by focusing on the study, teaching, and practice of the discourse arts. Moreover, the goals of humanism were to bring philosophical and religious ideals into the pragmatic world of social action. In short, humanists wanted to study and teach the arts of discourse in order to create a society where those ideals would have a direct, positive impact on both the individual and community. In the process, humanist scholars were deeply committed to education, and they were quite adroit at founding new educational institutions and traditions, while also transforming existing ones. Although history documents how humanism failed to meet these lofty goals, often because of both flawed thinking and flawed human nature, the institutional traditions of a broad liberal arts education, with a strong emphasis on discourse arts, became central to the development of higher education in Europe, England, and eventually, America. Mission statements and core curricula at many colleges and universities still bear the imprint of the humanist agenda.

[18] However, what really changed European culture during the Renaissance, just as what seems to be reshaping our culture today, was a revolution in the technologies of representation, mediation, and communication – we have the web, they had the printing press. While intellectuals like to think that they shape social development, and academics flatter ourselves with the notion that we are in the forefront of social change, it is often those involved with the practical development and application of new media technologies that do the actual work of social change, while we reflect upon and interpret those changes (not that we would want a society where technological changes proceeded without reflection and interpretation – consider nuclear weapons technologies, for example). As the great Jesuit scholar Walter J. Ong demonstrated through a lifetime of scholarship, the seventeenth-century intellectual revolutions in philosophy, science, engineering, economics, and politics, which shaped the modern world, were often rooted in the changes made possible by moving

from a society of hand-written texts to one of mass-produced printed texts.² For good or for ill, from the 1600s through the 1800s, Europe, England, and America evolved into the systematic, materialistic, bureaucratic, and industrialized societies whose conditions we describe with the term “modernity.” At the same time, the older and perhaps more conservative humanist traditions continued within the context of higher education despite the rapid changes in the broader society. As works such as *The Education of Henry Adams* make quite evident, it was only during the latter part of the nineteenth century that this truly began to change, and even as writers like Thomas Huxley advocated for a new kind of science-based higher education, John Cardinal Newman could still champion the liberal arts educational tradition grounded in humanism.³

[19] In the expansion and upheaval in higher education that went on at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, the old humanist traditions began to lose their institutional hegemony. While still present and active, their influence began to wane, as natural sciences, social sciences, and practical professions (e.g., engineering, business education, etc.) began to take a larger share of the curricular space. Interestingly, it was in this environment that the first real “English” departments were begun (since academic study of language and literature had traditionally focused on Greek and Latin, not on modern vernacular languages). Early on, these departments focused largely on linguistic studies, especially descriptive linguistics, but they also became involved with teaching introductory college rhetoric and writing courses to assure that students had the necessary communication skills to engage an advanced curriculum.

[20] At the same time, intellectuals and academics interested in the arts of discourse responded to these cultural changes in different ways. Some re-asserted the values of humanism more vigorously as an antidote to a culture that appeared ever more mechanistic and regimented. Sometimes this “neo-humanism” expressed itself in a more secular context, while at other times it combined with a renewed interest in religious faith (as in the case of T. S. Eliot). In England, the neo-humanists are often clustered around the figure of F. R. Leavis. Other scholars, usually from continental Europe, sought to integrate language study with modern philosophy of language, or to adapt language study to a more rigorously scientific methodology, one that emulated methods of the natural and social sciences. Modern structural linguistics was one area that grew from this effort, eventually combining with structural anthropology to produce one of formative modern theories of literature –

² Ong worked in concert with a community of scholars concerned with media, technology, and culture, including Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Jack Goody, and many others. A prolific scholar, Ong has a number of works that apply to these issues: *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958); *The Presence of the Word* (1967); *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology* (1971); *Interfaces of the Word* (1977); and *Orality and Literacy* (1982). Of these, I am thinking particularly of *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*.

³ In *The Education of Henry Adams*, historian Adams describes the movement from a more traditional humanist education in the first half of the nineteenth century to a more scientific and modern education at the opening of the twentieth century. John Cardinal Newman’s *The Idea of a University* articulates the traditional humanist agenda for higher education. Scientist Thomas Huxley, a contemporary of Newman, argued for the new form of university education that would place more central emphasis on the sciences, laying the foundation, in part, for the twentieth-century polytechnic university. He made this point in numerous essays and addresses. See his essay collection *Science and Education*.

structuralism. Still others, less concerned with overarching theory but still interested in structure, applied themselves more vigorously to the study of the formal features of literature and other types of discourse. Some of these formalists were particularly concerned with broader concepts of aesthetics, while others concentrated on the specific formal features of the individual literary work. Treating literature as “objects,” these critics, scholars, and language philosophers developed an “objective criticism” (usually associated with I. A. Richards in England and eventually with the so-called “New Criticism” in America).

[21] Looking specifically at American higher education, English departments during the first half of the twentieth century tended to preserve much of the humanist tradition of language study, applying it to an evolving canon of works in English rather than to the Greek and Roman classics. Much of this canon came from British literature prior to 1800, though nineteenth-century works, by both British and American writers, were added gradually. Much academic study was devoted to the editing and publishing of accurate additions of early works, an enterprise that continues to this day, though now with quite different cultural assumptions. Traditional biographical, historical, and aesthetic criticism, combined with some elements of the increasingly popular “new criticism” shaped both scholarship and teaching. By the forties and fifties, new criticism had taken an authoritative central position, with textual editing and historical/biographical study still active. In this context, however, American academic institutions experienced sudden unprecedented growth, first from the G.I. Bill generation of post-war students, then from the general patterns of population growth and economic development that characterized the post-war period. Finally, Cold War military expansion and the educational demands of the growing “military-industrial complex” led to vastly increased government support for education (what we characterize metonymically as the “Sputnik Effect”). English departments grew along with the rest of the universities, expanding the number, production, and influence of scholars and teachers trained in the new criticism, and thus making that set of practices seem a normative model for English studies for the foreseeable future. The fact of economic and institutional expansion during the period when this methodology came to the fore probably accounts for its extended period of influence in American English departments (roughly 1945-1975).

[22] Just as post-World War II America experienced great expansion, post-Vietnam America experienced contraction, and over-expanded and over-extended colleges and universities quickly felt the results. The new young scholars trained during the late sixties and earlier seventies found that the academic job market, so inviting only a few years earlier, had largely disappeared. Harvard and Yale Ph.D. graduates competed for one-year appointments teaching multiple sections of first-year composition when they had trained themselves to teach the finer points Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swift, or Austen. Many of these scholars were forced to make other plans and so chose alternative careers (in the mid seventies, as a newly minted B.A. in English, I worked in a technical editing department of an architecture-engineering firm, and that department was filled with these academic refugees – all Ph.D.s or A.B.D.s).

[23] During the prior decade of expansion, American scholars had begun to explore new approaches to literary study, showing interests in structuralism, mytho-poetic criticism (as from Northrop Frye), and some forms of psychoanalytic criticism. An ongoing interest in rhetorical criticism continued, but this was more likely found in Communication Studies

departments, rather than in English. Marxist criticism, influential on the continent and even in England, continued to be marginalized as a result of McCarthy-era anti-communism, but some scholars still pursued it. Still, a growing interest in theories coming from continental Europe laid the foundation for the major changes to come, and when college English departments contracted in the seventies, the smaller cadres of new graduate students began to experience something beyond the “new critical” training of their predecessors.

[24] It was during this period that the work of French poststructuralists first began to have an influence on American scholars, initially in places like Yale and Johns Hopkins. Central to this process was the work of Jacques Derrida, viewed by many as the primary practitioner of the deconstructive project. At the same time, work by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan brought a new version of Freudian theory to bear on literary study. Michel Foucault shaped a new study of literary history as an examination of discourses of power and intimidation. Work by French feminist theorists like Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous began to influence literary studies just as American feminists, both within and outside of the academy, were establishing a specific intellectual and political agenda. Numerous other theorists and perspectives also began to shape American English departments, especially neo-Marxist and material culture theorists from both England and the continent. As a result of these shifts from the mid-seventies on, the theoretical concerns and scholarly production of English departments in 1985 bore little resemblance to those of 1975. While many of the remaining historical and new critical scholars of the post-war generation struggled to understand and adapt to what seemed to many a frightening turn of events, it was now clear that the scholarly agenda of English departments had been seized by a new generation who worked largely from the new continental theories.

[25] This “brave new world” gleamed brightly for a few years, launching a number of influential scholarly careers and radically reshaping Ph.D. examination lists and course bibliographies, but since most of these theories shared a rather anti-foundationalist approach to language, discourse, and knowledge itself, they initiated a process of perpetual interrogation of whatever approach began to seem central and thus powerful. Through the last two decades, this process has developed into a disciplinary ethos of essentialist but free-floating skepticism that underlies a general failure to establish any consistent theoretical model or methodology (or even a consistent pattern of competing models and methodologies). In this fundamentally dynamic but unstable environment, the discipline of college English has become a collection of rather Balkanized pursuits and practices, often individually centered in one or another particular interest or group that seeks to establish its concerns as theoretically dominant, while regarding other approaches with anything from skepticism to hostility. Viewed from the inside, our discipline can seem at once confusing and electrifying, a dizzying array of diverse discourses shaping and reshaping themselves. Viewed from the outside, it can seem like a melee deteriorating into riot – Babel without even the half-completed tower to establish a focal point. (I have colleagues in other fields who scratch their heads and wonder just what we are doing; some only half-jokingly suggest that, were not for the fact that we continue to teach rather practical writing courses, we should probably be institutionalized or at least put on a fairly strict medication regimen.)

[26] I am not, however, longing for some return to the ideal earlier period of, say, neo-humanism or new criticism or something else. Nor am I necessarily lamenting the processes

of change and (here we go again) “paradigm shift.” English departments as sites of literary and language studies are relatively young as institutional history goes, and they have been undergoing frequent change ever since they first emerged in higher education a little over a century ago. The apparent stability found during the post-war period of growth, when new criticism was central, was due largely to external institutional, economic, and demographic factors and not to any inherently preferable qualities of the approaches that were dominant at that time.

[27] Still, it is clear that our discipline currently lacks focus and consistency and seems to be losing influence in both the academy and in the larger culture. While literature and the other arts of discourse are thriving, especially as they begin to be integrated with new, multi-media environments, English departments often struggle with declining numbers of majors and difficulty maintaining graduate programs when those who complete the programs find fewer and fewer job possibilities. Our largest growth areas are in practical writing (e.g., business writing, technical writing, and general writing courses), as well as in creative writing. Thus, our most consistently successful areas of employment for recent Ph.D.s are rhetorical studies and various aspects of writing pedagogy and composition studies. Additionally, we flatter ourselves as being an engine for positive social change and a force for social justice, but in an environment where we resist commitment to foundational concepts of “justice” and a “good society,” we actually do little more than make gestures in the direction of these goals rather than actually advancing them. In many respects, we do not lead the processes of social change but reflect those processes, as they were already active before we noticed them.

[28] As a result, those claims we make to attract students into English courses, perhaps even to major in the subject, have had little to do with the theoretical and scholarly discussions that have dominated our discipline for the past forty years or so. We find ourselves engaged in an unfortunate process of “bait and switch,” marketing our educational services from the perspective of traditional beliefs that our discipline does not really espouse anywhere but in the recruitment literature. This is clearly a sorry state of affairs, and a rather unnecessary one. We can establish some disciplinary focus, we can stand for something besides skepticism and Balkanization, and we can do so without sacrificing the hard-won diversity of subject matter and method that can enliven what we do. But this will take both intellectual effort and a great deal of personal and professional humility – we may have to start very simply.

[29] I return again to that love of language, that joy in words. These are very real experiences, neither superficial nor naïve. We have lost our joy in the possibilities of language, be it artistic or pragmatic, to engage us, transport us, and even if briefly, unite us. Obsessed with narrative, we have lost story, immersed in textuality, we have lost song, and caught up in our own careers, we have not heard the call to service. Obviously, I am striving for some sense of closure here (perhaps a naïve struggle), even provisional closure, which suggests we can once more believe that language has power that is other than sinister and manipulative. Ultimately, we can maintain a healthy skepticism only in the context of some foundation, some convictions. Obviously, those convictions can be understood only through the human limitations and social contingencies of language, but such limitations and contingencies need not preclude belief. For me as an individual scholar who can envision himself within a possible Catholic Intellectual Tradition, I find that, if I am to regain a faith in words, a faith

in language, I must renew my encounter with the language of faith, with the Word beyond the word (a kind of logo-decentering, if you will, a remystification of language).

Word of God – God of Words

God said “Let there be light”: and there was light. . . And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night (Genesis 1:3-5).

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).

And the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us (John 1:14).

[30] In the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, as with the whole of the Judeo-Christian tradition, we seem to begin in words and end in words, and the words are not “mere” words but the very substance of the divine transformed into the material creation of heaven and earth, of woman and man. In John’s Gospel, the Christ is the Word incarnate, Word in flesh. In the word of God, throughout the scriptural tradition, we find a God of words – for some, in skepticism perhaps, a god constructed only from language and authorized merely by our use of capitalization; for others, a God who works through words, who operates through language, and who lives, potentially, in our every effort to speak or write. This tradition offers something very special for the student of language, for one encounters this God chiefly through language. To study the gift of language, the power of words, is therefore both deeply empowering and deeply humbling. Who am I to enter into this sacred space? I am not worthy to receive this Word, this God, on my tongue or within my mind, in the sound or on the page. But words call out to us, from the ether, from the inspired imagination, from the page that testifies to that imagination. In this tradition, God gave us language that we might share ourselves, might share in life, in God. We begin and end in the Word.

[31] In my discipline, so divided and dispersed as it is, such statements might seem laughable, and in all honesty, I would hesitate to suggest this perspective to a number of colleagues. On one level, I fear their reactions and possible scorn, but I do not blame them. We all share a history where far too often the discourses of religion have been used as a barrier or a bludgeon – to entrap or beat down alternative views, to oppress and subjugate. Our very scriptures speak frequently and eloquently of such religious corruption and hypocrisy, yet most of us who have read those scriptures have seen our own personal failures reflected in the text. Too many have been and still are persecuted by the misapplication of religious doctrine of all kinds, and certainly the history of Catholicism has frequent examples. We have sinned against the Word in how we have used it and how we have failed to use it, by speaking and remaining silent we have sinned, in the process hardening not only our hearts but our critical awareness, our consciousness of the power of language, and cutting ourselves off from the power of the Word.

[32] But then, the Word is patient, the Word is kind – it persists against all obstacles, and all resistance – the call of language persists, and in any one moment we can hear that call and respond to it. We believe in words, in their power of transcendence, in their sacramental power, beginning in and returning to God.

[33] My attempts to sound inspired may fail here, as perhaps they should, since I am not a particularly strong student of scriptures (much less a strong practitioner of their message). Regardless of the power of my sentiments, the question remains as to how we bring this tradition of a language of faith and a faith in language into our work as scholars and teachers of language and literature in English departments. We spend years of study and struggle – getting through graduate school, completing degrees, seeking work, getting recognition, achieving tenure and promotion. We live in a practical, institutional space of very concrete, specific, and often regimented demands. What do we gain by meeting all these demands of discipline and institution? Joy? Satisfaction? Perhaps, or perhaps not. We grow older, near retirement, finally depart, and somewhere in a closet remain the yellowed pages of journal offprints and syllabi and letters that others and we have forgotten. We live in and through curriculum vitae, but is this textual trace of life a lived experience, and if so, what has been its purpose? Somewhere between the pragmatics of professionalism and the possibility of inspiration, we have to find the connections, in all disciplines, not merely in my own. What my own field of study offers is its central commitment to language, its unrelenting concern for words. We have something fundamental to contribute to a Catholic intellectual tradition if we begin by recognizing the potential spirit within the words we study.

[34] We have to begin by learning to listen all over again, by cultivating the silences that open rather than close us to the words of others. We have to continue by being dogged in our careful reception and study of those words, even while we must be slow to make judgments about their ultimate meaning and the possible intentions of those who have uttered or written them. We must recognize the need for intellectual humility, knowing that while we can participate in language, we cannot own or encompass it. Yet we must not be passive; rather, we must make the effort to speak up, to recognize our ability to respond (our *responsibility*) even while we know that what we contribute will be incomplete, partial, one voice in the polyphony of voices. Our words must be active and join in action that strives for positive change in our individual lives and in our communities.

[35] What I am trying to suggest here is that in the scholarship and teaching of language live great possibilities for Catholic intellectuals to engage with the fundamentals of belief in a tradition in which language is so essential. It is not necessarily about writing more articles or designing more courses on religious-related issues, though those activities are fine in themselves. It is not only about developing a scholarly and pedagogical agenda concerned with the kind of social justice advocated in the scriptures, though that is absolutely a necessary element. More than anything else it must be a return to a respect for, a reverence for, the potential of language to reshape our consciousness, our relationships, our lives, even our souls. If we recognize, quite simply, how precious and beautiful simple words can be, we can once again find transformation and even transcendence in even our humblest tasks with language. There is a spiritual discipline involved in this, as well as a call to service, and beyond any abstraction or sentiment, our work with words must make a difference to people in their everyday lives. I recall something that psychiatrist Robert Coles once wrote about the heart of his discipline:

When the heart dies, we slip into wordy and doctrinaire caricatures of life.
Our journals, our habits of talk become cluttered with jargon or the trivial. . .

But the real test is whether we best understand by this strange proliferation of language the worries, fears, or loves in individual people.

[36] Coles' perceptions are relevant for any intellectual enterprise, and importantly, he himself wrote of the importance of literature and the "call of stories." Like Coles, I understand the danger of my field growing abstract, bureaucratic, and self-satisfied, even though I appreciate the need for professionalization. But he is correct – we must understand what we do with and for real people in their everyday lives. Can we use our knowledge and insight into language to help people live better lives? Despite the clichéd forms of expressing the idea in college catalogs, I still believe that we can. I also believe that we must. For me, in my area of study, a renewed engagement with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition means a return to a basic belief in words as expressions of the Word, a belief in language as a sacramental experience, where any of our discourses, any of our utterances offer opportunities to share ourselves with others in the potential presence of divinity. Once more, I would like to see words not only as elements in a structure or as unstable and ephemeral signifiers, but also as opportunities for shared moments of transcendence.

[37] What I offer, therefore, comes from the world of telling stories, the world of narratives, as well as the world of rhythmic language and song and the world of ritual and performance – sites from which we can engage with language and people, with traditional and contemporary life, with the rootedness of discourse in the present, "unfinalized" moment, as well as with the possibility of a transcendence that suggests meaning beyond the merely contingent and ephemeral.⁴

[38] What I offer begins from and returns to stories and reflections, fragments of experience related through fragments of narrative – an insight in a darkened kitchen, a call in an empty classroom, a brief epiphany on a springtime campus, moments of doubt and indecision, moments of choice and action.

[39] I recall that late one night, near the end of my sophomore year in college, I stood alone in the kitchen after finishing Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. In that moment I recognized that, despite the fact that four years earlier I had consciously chosen to be an atheist, that I could no longer resist believing in the divine as a source of the human spirit. I began my personal journey back to faith. I recall another spring, some eight years later when, as a first-year doctoral student I began to doubt my ability to complete the degree and pursue my field of study. Having come from the graduate director's office in a hilltop administration building, I walked out into a late spring afternoon, with a view of the campus green below me. Trees were in bloom, young undergraduates from distant countries were playing soccer, and a small chapel stood at the corner of the open field. It felt so good to be alive in that moment that I was no longer worrying about my struggle to write about Edmund Spenser. It dawned upon me then that what I really valued in my work could not be taken from me,

⁴Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin develops the concept of discourse being "unfinalizable." While complex and ambiguous, like most of Bakhtin's ideas, "unfinalizability" describes how in rereading a text we are forever confronting new possibilities – there is no final reading of the text, merely additional readings, new experiences in new times and places with new associations. Yet there is still a text and a process of reading that ties all of these readings together.

whether or not I ever completed the degree or obtained an academic job. What drew me to the study of language and literature were simple, basics – words and books, people and voices. I could, in my haste or folly, abandon these fundamental gifts, but no one could rob me of them.

[40] In such moments, I have sensed that what I study has a power to reach me when I least expect it, to shape my vision and change my understanding. I believe that this power is a mystery, but one that I can share in if I am patient and open to the possibilities. I have continued to find this belief confirmed at moments throughout my work as a scholar and a teacher, no matter what long periods of darkness and doubt may have lain between them. I find myself called to share this understanding with others, and that is how I move into and through a Catholic Intellectual Tradition, to share the possibility of belief I find in words. The Christ that I meet in the Gospels makes this call in simple terms, rejecting elaboration and ornament, and seeking instead the concrete image, the resonant symbol, the brief but moving story. In the words and books, the people and voices, I seek Christ the poet, Christ the writer, who calls us to be whole in words.

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