

CRISIS AND COLLEGIALITY

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The idea of collegiality—of one's interaction with others in the professional workplace—is a profane concept modeled on the idea of free linguistic exchange. A good colleague participates in a process of reciprocal exchange—a conversation—that produces a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The idea of collegiality thus stands in contrast to the idea of the sacred. In sacred interaction, the individual is not an equal participant in a conversation but, on the contrary, a speck in the face of the infinite, a mortal confronted by immortality. God gives commands: he does not cast his vote among a democracy of equals.

But this way of putting it suggests the inseparability of the concepts of collegiality and hierarchy. In the scene of human action, the equality of “peripheral” linguistic exchange is fundamentally related to the hierarchy of “central” sacred exchange. What makes this relationship essentially *scenic* is the inseparability of the central object's significance or sacrality from the profane “linguistic” attentions of those on the periphery. For instance, for 99.99% of the population, voting in an election means granting someone *else* power, power that may be used against the very same voters responsible for electing the person in the first place. Or, to shift from politics back to religion, God gives commands, but you have to believe in him *first* in order to hear those commands. More precisely, you already have to be capable of “profane” dialogue in order to understand God's “sacred” instructions. Thus, whether or not God exists, the very fact that we are able to talk about him indicates that the question of his existence is in the first place a question of his sacred designation within the general scene of human representation, which is to say, of his central significance among “profane” or “peripheral” language users. Nietzsche's slogan, “God is dead,” depends upon this anthropological analysis for its philosophical bite. The slogan is really a backhanded complement toward religion, because it acknowledges the superior generative power of the sacred over purely “metaphysical” abstractions such as Being.

As Durkheim realized, the difference between sacred and profane is a generative difference, from which all other cultural differences derive.

In the compact ritual societies studied by Durkheim, reciprocal exchange among profane equals remains strictly separated from sacred exchange with the gods. It is tempting to believe that modern societies have dispensed with the old hierarchical forms of sacred exchange, upon which so-called “primitive” people appear irrationally to depend. But this is to take a needlessly parochial attitude toward the sacred by assuming that its often bizarre appearance to the outside observer is an indication of its ultimate uselessness. By describing the sacred as functionless, we do not so much explain it, as explain it away. The sacred becomes an epiphenomenon of history. Like purgatory, it is destined to decline and fade as people become progressively more enlightened as to religion’s ultimate basis in the supernatural. If, on the contrary, the sacred is taken seriously by an anthropology, it must be understood as a constitutive category of anthropology itself.

In this analysis, I assume that the sacred exists in muted form today, just as it did at the origin of humanity. If we listen carefully, its distant reverberations can be heard beneath the general turmoil and profanity of modern life. I will not, however, seek to show how the sacred appears across the spectrum of professional organizations. The purpose of this essay is to analyze its manifestation in one particular group: among professors of literature. I hasten to add, however, that I think my remarks are generalizable to other areas of university life, in particular, to the other disciplines in the humanities and “soft” social sciences. In extrapolating to those disciplines which share the same general anthropological focus as literature departments, I certainly do not wish to imply that individuals in the “hard” natural sciences of biology, chemistry, and physics are not every bit as susceptible to sacred mechanisms of “crisis and collegiality” as are their colleagues in the human sciences and humanities. The crucial difference is that in the natural sciences there is a well-established de-anthropologized scientific method, which functions as an objective or transcendental “mediator” when intellectual crises emerge. But this is only to concede my fundamental point, which is that collegiality as an object of study is conceivable only from within the specifically anthropological framework presupposed by the humanities and human sciences. The very interpretive “softness” of these disciplines is also the source of their ultimate strength. Anthropology is above all the study of systems of symbolic meaning produced by humans themselves. It is this inherent self-reflexivity that differentiates anthropology from the natural sciences. The politics of collegiality affects every discipline, but only in the humanities has this politics become the basis for an actual disciplinary “method.”¹

¹Thus, for example, Thomas Kuhn’s notion of the scientific enterprise as a series of incommensurable “paradigm shifts” between communities of researchers takes as its object

It is therefore with the political that we must begin in order to delve beneath to understand the anthropology of “crisis and collegiality.” If the culture wars thus far have raged exclusively on the terrain of the humanities professors, this is because our understanding of what is culturally significant continues to be defined by a fairly traditional (romantic) model of cultural *Bildung*. The reduction of this debate to a contest between factions of the political left and right merely demonstrates the futility of attempting to resolve the debate in purely political terms.

What, then, is this crisis, and why is it political? In his astute and frequently witty commentaries on literary and cultural criticism, Mark Bauerlein argues that today’s literary-critical avant-garde are fighting a toy battle in which the low intellectual stakes are directly proportional to the public’s low opinion of the humanities. Nobody takes the humanities seriously anymore except the humanities professors themselves. For example, in his review of *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, a collection of essays defending the obscurity of academic writing by theorists, Bauerlein offers the following comment: “Stuck in an attitude that combines the adversarial with the self-congratulatory, [the contributors] mingle avant-garde visions with a protest conception of the university, turning crisis, notoriety, and alienation into a triumph and ignoring the diminishing status of the humanities” (2004, 190). Contrary to what one might expect, Bauerlein observes, the response from the leading professional critics to this inexorable process of marginalization and isolation is not a reinvigorated attempt to reach out to the public, but rather a sulky retreat into ever more elaborate forms of condescension and smug arrogance that, from the point of view of the public, only confirms the massive irrelevance of the humanities. The scandal is the professors get paid to parade their irrelevance.

What explains this curious habit of academic agoraphobia? In his “autopsy” of the discipline of literary criticism, Bauerlein argues that the increasingly moribund state of literature departments is a symptom of an internal intellectual and professional “crisis,” in which sight of the original object of knowledge (literature) has been lost. But rather than attempt to define literature and lay out some basic epistemological principles that might ensure a working consensus, contemporary criticism uses a perverse “anti-method” strategy, which includes such obscurantist tactics as name-dropping (“As Foucault says . . .”), personal anecdote (“I was at a conference in Bali one time . . .”), and catch phrases (“So and so is essentializing,” “I want to problematize X,”

not the physical, chemical, or biological objects of natural science, but the place of these natural-scientific objects among the “interpretive communities” or “culture” of the scientists themselves.

“I want to consider the question of X”), all of which substitute for real argument. Bauerlein explains this strategy as politically motivated rather than properly theoretical or epistemological. His closing remarks to *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy* (1997) are worth citing in full:

Current usage shows that criticism is not about knowledge of objects, but about the politics of inquiry, which includes the political status of the inquirer. Literary study is no longer literary analysis. It is now an occasion for institutional certification. Those who use terms in the right way display their intellectual discernment, their cultural interest, their political sensitivity, and their moral regard, which is to say, their eligibility for entering today’s academic order. Critical terms are tokens of belonging. (148)

Bauerlein’s final sentence hits home. What makes the humanities so comfortably “at home with themselves” is the sense of membership one gains from reproducing the in-group rituals that define the group’s existence.

This need to establish an identity with respect to the group is very old. In traditional religious societies, the significance of an individual life is measured by the “rites of passage” that initiate one into the community.² Birth, adolescence, adulthood, marriage, and death are all stages of transition associated with well-defined collective rituals that help the individual come to terms with the group—or, taken from the point of view of the group rather than the individual, help the group come to terms with the individual. For, on one argument, that is what ritual does: it protects the social order from the *conflictive desires* of its individual members.

But why is desire conflictive? Desire is always *mediated* desire. What attracts the subject to the object is not the object “in itself,” but the fact that it is desired by *another subject*. The second subject functions as the model-mediator for the first. By imitating the model, the subject learns to desire the object. The mediation of desire applies no less to the model, who is himself a subject imitating the desires of another. According to René Girard (whose idea of “mimetic desire” I am summarizing), societies exist only if they can control desire, which, owing to its extremely contagious or “mimetic” nature, can quickly get out of hand and lead to a “mimetic crisis.” This crisis is a period of extreme disorder, in which the cultural and symbolic differences that normally structure a society and help to keep mimetic desire at bay—for example, the difference between king and subject, or, to give an example closer to home, the professional difference between a literary critic and a philosopher—dissolve into a general state of

²The classic work is Arnold van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage*, first published in 1908.

undifferentiation. For Girard, the social order is characterized by this oscillation between crisis and resolution, between conflict and “collegiality.” From this perspective, the initiation rites studied by Arnold van Gennep function as carefully staged “preemptive strikes” by the social order, which attempts to inoculate itself against the dangers of a desire that has no object.³

Of course, in modern society we have discarded the old ritual ways. We no longer believe in the rites of passage that once formed a necessary part of our relationship to the social order. That is what we generally mean by our modernity: the beginning of our “disenchantment” with the sacred (in 500 BCE or 1600 or 1800), when the old ritual center, formerly occupied by the sacred figures of religion, was unceremoniously severed of its sacred content, like the unhappy head of Louis XVI of France. There have since been many philosophical ideas offered as substitutes for the sacred figures of the ritual order: man, reason, the subject, the imagination, and of course philosophy itself. But the consensus today, at least among the intellectual avant-garde, is that, like a play by Samuel Beckett, the center should be left conspicuously vacant of any significant content or “transcendental signified.”

But there is a difference between the presentation of significant content as a literary fiction on the one hand, and as an anthropological hypothesis on the other. What determines significance in both cases is historically motivated: literature takes its content from the sacred myths and rituals that precede it, as in Greek tragedy where the central figure’s significance, which justifies his “heroic” presence on stage, is usually inherited from a preexisting myth. Likewise, literary criticism assumes the historical significance of the “textual” objects it studies (the canon). But only (high) theory seeks to make literary significance a model of anthropological interpretation in general.

But once the literary object is made a model of general anthropological interpretation, criticism loses its original *raison d’être*. This is the underlying reason for the moribund state of literature and humanities departments today. Defined as *literary* criticism, literature as an academic discipline is indeed dead. The era of high theory, which Bauerlein wittily (if also a shade nostalgically?) recalls when he was a graduate student at UCLA in the 1980s,⁴ was in fact a belated effort to revitalize literary study by applying the model of literary

³For Girard’s original analysis of mimetic desire in the novel, see his *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965). Girard’s later works, in particular *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987), develop the analysis in a more explicitly anthropological direction.

⁴See Bauerlein, “The Humanities at Home With Themselves,” which is a clever and insightful review of English studies in general and Robert Scholes’s *The Crafty Reader* in particular.

interpretation more broadly across the humanities and even into the social sciences (for example, in anthropology and sociology). But the experiment failed, not because it was wrong, but because it was only partially right. Textualism began as a youthful rebellion against the old academic order dominated by the new critics and traditional historical scholarship, but it ended as the establishment. This is the lesson of Bauerlein's brilliant review of Robert Scholes's *The Crafty Reader*, which (Bauerlein argues) assimilates in irenic and liberal fashion every possible academic theory to the art of crafty reading. Taken to this extreme, the theory of textuality (deconstruction) is indeed toothless and insignificant, a theory exclusively by and for academics themselves.

But the function of the humanities is not just an "academic" question to be peaceably divided among the particular disciplinary specialists. Considered *in toto*, the humanities define an anthropology that includes us all. This is why it matters whether we are capable of including the public in our scholarly conversations. For if we are not, then we are destined to fail in our collective mission, which is ultimately to understand why the humanities matter at all. If we cannot even tell ourselves why they matter, then there is little hope that we can tell those who have no predisposition to see things from the specialist's point of view.

In his review of Scholes, Bauerlein ends by pointing out that Scholes "externalizes" the internal conflicts of contemporary theory and criticism (2002, 431). The only schools of interpretation for which Scholes reserves any real scorn are the new critics and the Christian fundamentalists. Bauerlein rightly points to the transparency of this collective act of academic *ressentiment*, which is aimed either at a straw target from the past (the new critics), or at a group that remains safely distant from academic readers themselves (Christian fundamentalism). The tactic is nonetheless instructive, for it demonstrates just how deeply ingrained and shopworn the old theory habits have become. By projecting resentment onto those outside the university, the uniformity and harmony of the internal academic order—its *constitutive collegiality*—is bolstered and upheld. But, at the same time, the opportunity for understanding resentment as an internal element of the professional critical enterprise is eliminated.

But this should not surprise us. The externalizing of conflict constitutes the real "method" of humanistic inquiry, one as old as humanity itself. The humanities are "at home with themselves" because they have erected an ideological wall between themselves and their (imaginary) external other. In the face of this founding and generative difference, the differences within become all but insignificant.

Is it possible to transcend this intellectual version of ritual scapegoating? Do the humanities really need this ideological wall in

order to survive? In the narrow “high” theory sense, yes, they do. High theory defines itself by its opposition to those outside its inner circle. The shrewdness of Bauerlein’s review of Scholes emerges in Bauerlein’s anecdotal description of his own snobbery and elitism as a graduate-student disciple of Derrida in the 1980s. As Bauerlein’s recollection vividly demonstrates, the point of this snobbery was not purely intellectual. It was above all a rite of passage, an attempt to create a professional identity in an environment brimming with the resentment and rivalries of graduate school and a fiercely competitive academic job market.

But there is another meaning for theory that eschews the sociological connotations of the high/low distinction upon which deconstruction and its avatars depend. This explanation is anthropological rather than narrowly sociological. The origin of the high/low distinction depends upon an opposition that is not between individuals or groups of individuals, but between the entire human community and its sacred other. It is the scandal of our mutual exclusion from the sacred that motivates us to imagine substitutes for it—and to resent those who appear to have usurped it. But once we admit that contemporary criticism defines itself by its resentment of the “high” center, we also disarm it of its utopian and modernist ambitions. No longer a privileged critic of the existing cultural order, the critic becomes another participant in it. But then the critic must learn to speak in a manner that is minimally comprehensible to the culture at large.

This requires less arrogance and more reciprocity, which is to say, more “collegiality,” in the fundamental sense of a conversation from which no one is, in principle, excluded. No doubt truly original ideas require time to make their way from their originators to the general public. The academic avant-garde would have us believe that this fact is sufficient to justify their obscurantist strategies. But what it really justifies is the existence of the peer group itself, which reproduces itself through the mimetic discipleship of those willing to be initiated into its central doctrines. The crisis Bauerlein points to in humanities departments is indeed attributable to the loss of the old theoretical objects of inquiry. (Who reads Durkheim today? Not the disciples of cultural studies.) But I do not think that this crisis is a purely methodological issue.⁵ Culture originates in crisis. And insofar as the human is historically coeval with culture, this origin-in-crisis is also the origin of the human.

⁵On this point I agree with Roger Seamon, who, in an otherwise sympathetic review, suggests that Bauerlein fetishizes disciplinarity by implicitly reducing, on the model of the social sciences, the literary object to the disciplinary object of scientific inquiry. See Seamon (1998).

The idea that the human originates in an *event* of mimetic crisis—that is, in an event in which exacerbated mimetic conflict over an appetitive object leads the rivals to designate, rather than appropriate, the object—is controversial. Nonetheless, this is exactly how Eric Gans proposes we understand the anthropological significance of Girard’s notion of mimesis. For Gans, the mimetic crisis, which Girard at times appears almost to reduce to the structure of an empirical “mechanism,” in fact describes the minimal triangular configuration of the originary scene of human culture. The moment in which both subject and model interpret their mimetically driven gestures toward the object as a *designation* of the object is, Gans argues, the crucial point in the emergence of the human. The subject’s “aborted gesture of appropriation” (16) is imitated by the model and vice versa, thus providing the occasion for a specifically symbolic form of mimesis: the mimetic/symbolic designation of the central appetitive object.⁶

Like Girard, Gans proposes that the human originates in a mimetic crisis. But unlike Girard, for Gans the representation of this crisis in history is already implicit in the structure of its originary solution in the mimetic-symbolic structure of the aborted gesture. The subject’s return to the model’s gesture as a symbol of the object momentarily defers the mimetic conflict provoked by the object as a function of appetitive need. This tension between the object as given by appetite and the object as given by the collectively produced symbol guarantees the structure of the scene, which exists only in the precarious homeostasis between the centrifugal pull of the sign (which attracts “mimetic” attention) and the centripetal pull of the object (without which the originary sign would ultimately be powerless because “unmotivated” or “baseless”). The mimetic crisis thus provides the occasion in which symbolic culture was both invented and discovered: “invented” because there is no precedent in the animal kingdom from which this form of historically contingent symbolic behavior could evolve gradually by biological evolution; “discovered” because from the viewpoint of the original participants an event as collectively significant as the first moment of human history can hardly be considered an “invention.”

Gans’s idea of culture as a historical series of increasingly more minimal representations of the originary event (in ritual, in aesthetic works, and in a theoretical anthropology) allows us to put the current political crisis of literature departments into its broader anthropological context. The political crisis is a distant historical reproduction of the originary crisis. But the significance of the former is inversely proportional to its historical distance from the latter, which alone deserves the title of an unprecedented historical event.

⁶Among Eric Gans’s many works of “generative anthropology,” see, in particular, his *Signs of Paradox* (1997), esp. 13-36.

But this is only to admit what we already know: that the significance of the political crisis in literature departments is truly *minimal*. The humanities have become all but insignificant today, because high culture and religious ritual have become all but insignificant. But this is not cause for hand-wringing and finger-pointing, whether from the political right or left. On the contrary, however much we may yearn for the enchantments of the old religious institutions, life without them provides far more degrees of freedom than life with them. When "culture" denotes an individual lifestyle rather than a centralized collective identity, it becomes pointless to expect the humanities to fulfill the task of the latter. But the demise of the old high culture opens the way not just to popular culture and the market-driven entertainment industry, but to the *theory* of culture. Theory in the humanities must learn to become originary, which is to say, minimally anthropological rather than maximally political and institutional. Only then will we be able to speak in terms comprehensible both to ourselves and to those outside the university. Which is to say, only then will we be able to think collegiality in fundamental anthropological terms.

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