

Ronald Strickland

Nothing that is Human is Alien to Me: Neoliberalism and the End of *Bildung*

Homo sum : humani nihil a me alienum puto
(Inscription from Terence's *Heautontimorumenos*,
on a roof-beam of Montaigne's tower)

Montaigne's Ironic Maxim

THE EPIGRAM FROM TERENCE – «I am a man: I consider nothing that is human to be alien to me» – has an ironic resonance in its original context. It is spoken by a busybody in response to his neighbor's suggestion that he mind his own business. It's more difficult to say what the phrase meant to Montaigne. Probably, given his characteristic skepticism, he appreciated Terence's irony. And perhaps he also saw in Terence's words a bold assertion of the self-sufficiency and universality of the autonomous individual subject of modernity. It is the latter, positive meaning, certainly, that has come to be associated with the phrase in its afterlife as a familiar maxim, and the quotation is often mistakenly attributed to Montaigne, the preeminent early modern humanist, rather than to Terence. Modernity assumes an aggregation of private individuals "voluntarily" joining together to form a society, in contrast to feudal society, in which the subject is held in place by the force of a divinely ordained hierarchy. Not coincidentally, modern philosophy of aesthetics begins with a focus on the individual's unique experience. The individual perceives a work of art and has a spontaneous reaction to it. But in order to legitimate this unique feeling, the individual must make a judgment, comparing this object or experience to other objects or experiences, and articulating this judgment in such a way that it can be shared with other people. In this way the individual's distinct, private response is connected to an ostensibly universal response, and a consensual community is formed. The two parts of Montaigne's maxim are honored – the singularity of «I

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am a man», and the universality of «nothing that is human is alien to me». In modernity an ideological contradiction between the tendency toward individualism and an opposing tendency toward normalization is reconciled, symbolically, in aesthetic response, and, functionally, in the process of *Bildung*, or the individual's acculturation. This reconciliation – and modern society's confidence in the individual's capacity for self-knowledge and universal understanding – has become increasingly difficult to sustain in late modernity, and my purpose in this essay is to offer some reflections on this difficulty in the context of current political challenges to literary education.

The crisis of the subject has been a constant preoccupation among academic humanists for several decades now. Poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and Marxist theorists have unmasked the role of literature and literary studies in producing a “universal” subject of modernity – a presumed standard of European, male, and bourgeois subjectivity against which everything else is judged and found wanting. This critique remains valid, but nonetheless it seems increasingly beside the point in the context of globalization and the current “neoliberal” restructuring of national university systems. Neoliberalism revives Adam Smith's concept of the “invisible hand of the market,” seeking to remove state control and regulation from commercial and industrial activity and, at the same time, to impose the rationality of the “free market” in areas such as social security, health care and education through the direct privatization of ownership of state systems and the extension of business-oriented goals to public institutions. A significant feature of the neoliberal transformation of higher education involves a shift from the traditional “Humboldtian” model, in which the role of higher education is to serve society by producing enlightened citizens, to a “market” model, in which the university's role is to serve global business interests by producing “flexibly” skilled workers and promoting commodity-fetishist consumerism rather than altruistic models of citizenship. Though the function of literary education in modernity has too often served undemocratic purposes, literature has an important role to play in resisting the anti-democratic agenda of neo-liberalism. If the goal of academic humanists is to develop a viable structure of education for democratic political agency, the neoliberal ideology of the market university poses a greater threat to this goal than does the residual taint of sexist, racist or elitist bourgeois ideology in literary studies.

The Subject of Bildung

I will take up this crisis of higher education at the end of this essay, but first let me present some exemplary literary texts that, coincidentally,

invoke Montaigne's maxim with an irony that registers the decline of the liberal subject since the early 1960s. The first example is from Jean-Paul Sartre's memoir, *Les Mots*, published in 1964. Early in the text, Sartre describes the reverence in which, as a young child, he held his grandfather – a professor of linguistics and a “man of letters”. Sartre recounts his attempts to impress the adults in his life by pretending to have a precocious ability to read texts that were far beyond his capacity to understand. Perplexed by the ending of *Madame Bovary*, the seven-year-old Sartre asks his grandfather for help:

de quoi parlent les livres? Qui les écrit? Pourquoi? Je m'ouvris de ces inquiétudes à mon grand-père qui, après réflexion, jugea qu'il était temps de m'affranchir [...] Il m'assit sur ses genoux et me regarda dans le fond des yeux: «je suis homme, répétait-il d'une voix publique, je suis homme et rien d'humain ne m'est étranger». (Sartre 1964: p. 49)

The child surely remains as mystified after the grandfather's response as he was beforehand. But there is a more significant joke at the grandfather's expense. Sententiously oblivious to the ironic potential of Montaigne's maxim and to the disproportion between his performance and the occasion, the grandfather reveals the ambivalence in modernity's confidence in the autonomous individual at a moment when the atrocities of World War II had seriously undermined Europe's grand narratives of cultural superiority and human dignity. Yet, if the young Sartre can be excused for not grasping his grandfather's confidence in humanist individualism in this scene, the older Sartre, at the end of *Les Mots*, has found a basis on which to assert a stubborn – not to say “heroic” – belief in individual autonomy:

Je suis redevenu le voyageur sans billet que j'étais à sept ans: le contrôleur est entré dans mon compartiment, il me regarde, moins sévère qu'autrefois: en fait il ne demande qu'à s'en aller, qu'à me laisser finir le voyage en paix; que je lui donne une excuse valable, n'importe laquelle, il s'en contentera. Malheureusement je n'en trouve aucune et, d'ailleurs, je n'ai même pas l'envie d'en chercher: nous resterons en tête à tête, dans le malaise, jusqu'à Dijon où je sais fort bien que personne ne m'attend. J'ai désinvesti mais je n'ais pas défroqué: j'écris toujours. Que faire d'autre?

Nulla dies sine linea.

C'est mon habitude et puis c'est mon métier. Longtemps j'ai pris ma plume pour une épée, a présent je connais notre impuissance. N'importe: je fais, je ferai des livres; il en faut; cela sert tout de même. La culture ne sauve rien ni personne, elle ne justifie pas. Mais c'est un produit de l'homme; il s'y projette, s'y reconnaît; seul, ce miroir critique lui offre son image. (Sartre 1964: p. 205)

Nulla dies sine linea – Never a day without a line; for Sartre, culture neither justifies anything nor anyone, but human production – writing – is something. It gives meaning; it marks one's existence.

While Sartre's existentialist conclusion salvages some vestige of human dignity in the wake of the inhumanity of the holocaust, an even greater challenge to the individual – consumerism – was already looming on the horizon. In *Les Choses*, published in 1963, a year before Sartre's *Les Mots*, Georges Perec chronicles the life of a young couple, Jérôme and Sylvie, who have dropped out of the university to take jobs as interviewers collecting data on consumer preferences. As the aspirations of the young Sartre were overdetermined by the books given to him by the adults in his life, the aspirations of Jérôme and Sylvie are defined by advertising. In effect, the subjectivities of Jérôme and Sylvie are determined by their desire for material possessions. In buying these objects or, more often, in simply yearning for them without being able to buy, they would express their individuality; they would distinguish themselves as individuals. And, of course, the advertisements promote this notion of distinction through the concepts of "discrimination" and "taste". But in seeking to find meaning through consumption, Jérôme and Sylvie waste their lives without recognizing that they have achieved neither the distinction they seek nor anything like autonomous individualism. We read, for example, a banal account of their work routine, describing the surveys in which Jérôme and Sylvie ask consumers their tastes and preferences:

Pourquoi les aspirateurs-traîneaux se vendent-ils si mal? Que pense-t-on, dans les milieux de modeste extraction, de la chicorée? Aime-t-on la purée toute faite, et pourquoi? [...] Quelles qualités demandez-vous à votre matelas? [...] Que pensez-vous de votre machine à laver? Est-ce que vous en êtes satisfaite? Est-ce qu'elle lave bien? Est-ce qu'elle déchire le linge? (Perec 1963: p. 33-34)

This list of consumer-preference questions extends for more than two pages, at the end of which comes the punch line: «rien de ce qui était humain ne leur fut étranger» (Perec 1963: p. 35). In Perec's ironic transformation, these words describe the human being reductively, as a projection of the desire to consume; the subject is manipulated by the system of commodity fetishism. "Aesthetic judgment", the ostensibly abstract and spontaneous basis of bourgeois community, has been reduced to the level of the quotidian, quantified and calibrated to serve the profit machine of mass consumer society. The result, I think, is a condition even more bleak than that described by Sartre, in which the human subject has little hope of escaping overdetermination.

Aside from the coincidence that both Sartre and Perec playfully mock Montaigne's maxim of individual humanism, I am interested in these two works as texts that are influenced by the tradition of *Bildungsroman*. If individualism is the defining mode of subjectivity in modernity, it is in the transition from adolescence to adulthood that individualism presents itself most persistently as a crisis in the social order. The *Bildungsroman*, which takes as its specific topic the formation of a young person's identity, is a particularly rich site for the discursive representation of the crisis of the subject in late modernity. As Franco Moretti has suggested, the *Bildungsroman* is in some sense the quintessential aesthetic discourse of modernity because in its representation of the social integration of youth it so directly links the aesthetic process to its ideological function. In traditional societies, youth is simply a biological category. There is no such thing as a distinctive youth culture. But in modernity, when stable communities are steadily eroded, when geographic mobility is, increasingly, *required* by the regime of production, when the world of work changes rapidly, the traditional socialization of youth becomes progressively more difficult. Moretti has identified signs of this tension even in the prototypical *Bildungsroman*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*:

Already in Meister's case, "apprenticeship" is no longer the slow and predictable progress toward one's father's work, but rather an uncertain exploration of social space, which the nineteenth century – through travel and adventure, wandering and getting lost, "Bohème" and "parvenir," will underline countless times. It is a necessary exploration: in dismantling the continuity between generations, as is well known, the new and destabilizing forces of capitalism impose a hitherto unknown mobility. But it is also a yearned-for exploration, since the selfsame process gives rise to unexpected hopes thereby generating an interiority not only fuller than before, but also, as Hegel clearly saw, even though he deplored it – perennially dissatisfied and restless. (Moretti 1987: p. 4)

The more fully-developed "interiority" of modernity supports a self-regulating subject, cut free from traditional ties of extended family and community. This discursively produced "interiority" is naturalized as a spontaneous affirmation of the structure of the social order even though the protagonist's youthful idealism will be diluted by some degree of cynicism. In the ideological system of modernity it is neither necessary nor sufficient that the social order should be fair and legal, but it must be cloaked in a symbolic legitimacy. One must give consent as a free individual, not as a fearful subject. It is the youth's introduction to culture that makes this social integration possible, and the *Bildungsroman* is a particularly self-conscious example of this ideological process.

Strictly defined, the genre of *Bildungsroman* would comprise a relatively small number of works. But elements of the genre are everywhere to be found in modern European fiction. It engages such a wide variety of writers and spawns such a wide range of variations, I think, because it serves such a crucial ideological function. So, even though it may be difficult to take an affirmative *Bildungsroman* seriously in the latter half of the twentieth century, writers like Perec return to the pattern in order to try to understand precisely the failure of modernity. Consider a more recent text, Michel Houellebecq's *Plateforme*, published in 2001. *Plateforme* is the story of Michel, a forty-year-old Parisian civil servant who works in the Ministry of Culture. Michel is a loner whose social isolation is represented as, among other things, a failure to make the transition from youth to adulthood. As the novel opens, his father has just been murdered. «*Je ne crois pas*», he tells the reader, «*à cette théorie selon laquelle on deviant réellement adult à la mort de ses parents; on ne deviant jamais réellement adult*» (Houellebecq: p. 11). In fact, Michel really never grows up. Fixated on a rather infantile version of sexual gratification, he stumbles into a relationship with the woman of his dreams after meeting her on a vacation he has taken after his father's funeral. Valérie, Michel's lover, initiates the relationship, she always satisfies his every sexual desire, she never complains about anything he does and never shows any indication of dissatisfaction with him. But like all childhood fantasies this one is short-lived; at the end of their first year together she dies in his arms as the victim of a terrorist's bullet. Bereft of his one chance for happiness, Michel withdraws into solitude again, and, at the conclusion of the novel, is simply waiting for death to come – though he is only forty-one years old. There are some interesting suggestions in the novel that Michel's fate, to never become «really adult», represents, in some sense, the failure of culture – the growing inadequacy of *Bildung* – in late modern society. The narrative contains numerous observations on the sad state of European culture and the irrelevance of official “high culture” to the lives of ordinary people. This critique of culture begins in the novel in an early scene in which, shortly after the murder of his father, Michel is being interviewed as a potential suspect by a mildly, or, one might say, “professionally” suspicious police detective, Captain Chaumont. When the detective asks Michel where he was on the night of the murder, Michel reflects that perhaps he was at an opening – a *vernissage*.

«... J'étais peut-être à un vernissage.

– Un vernissage? Il attendait patiemment, les doigts à quelques centimètres au-dessus du clavier.

– Oui, je travaille au ministère de la Culture. Je prépare des dossiers pour

le financement d'expositions, ou parfois de spectacles.

– Des spectacles?

– Des spectacles... de danse contemporaine... Je sentais radicalement désespéré, envahi par la honte.

– En somme, vous travaillez dans l'action culturelle.

– Oui, c'est ça... On peut dire ça comme ça». Il me fixait avec une sympathie nuancée de sérieux. Il avait conscience de l'existence d'un secteur culturel, une conscience vague mais réelle. Il devait être amené à rencontrer toutes sortes de gens, dans sa profession; aucun milieu social ne pouvait demeurer complètement étranger. La gendarmerie est un humanisme. (Houellebecq: p. 20)

By the time Captain Chaumont inquisitively repeats «*Des spectacles?*» readers of “pulp” fiction in the noir tradition will imagine his raised eyebrow and recognize this scene with a chuckle – the embarrassing *metiér* of the suspect is more typically that of pornographer, or, perhaps the suspect is compelled to reveal some sexual “perversion” in order to prove that he is not guilty of a serious crime. But nothing can shock Captain Chaumont. «*La gendarmerie est un humanisme*»; the proud individual of Montaigne's maxim has become the humanist as world-weary detective who has seen everything. Not even the sleaziest side of humanity will remain completely alien to him. Yet this little joke at the expense of “culture” has its serious side. Most of the artists with whom Michel interacts in his job at the Ministry of Culture are portrayed as charlatans and entrepreneurs; the only artists for whom we see Michel showing some sympathetic interest are those who produce conceptual art that resists the commodity fetishist consumption system of late modernity. Culture, for Michel, is banal, ineffectual and slightly embarrassing. One artist, for example, practices a “trash” aesthetic in which he exhibits rotting meat in women's undergarments, or in another instance, cultivates maggots in his own excrement, releasing the flies in art galleries (Houellebecq 2001: p. 192). This artist, nonetheless, is one of only two in whom Michel takes a protective and professional interest. In this, as in his personal life, Michel rejects the appeal of consumerism as the foundation of human subjectivity. But he is at a loss to find a viable meaning for life elsewhere. Hence, he remains stuck at a sort of pre-oedipal stage.

In the generational gap between modern writers like Sartre and late modern writers like Perec and Houellebecq one can trace a shift from the cultural *Bildung* of modernity to the consumerist commodity fetishism of late modernity. In the era of industrial capitalism social subjectivity was predicated upon the adult male worker's productive capacity; the subjectivities of women and children were constituted in relation to that of the adult male worker. According to the conventional

logic of modernity, adolescents, for example, were not fully productive workers; hence they were not social agents. But they did become agents-as-consumers after World War Two. The adolescent is, in fact, the ideal subject of an economic order in which consumer demand for services and non-durable goods seemingly generates profits out of thin air. In late modernity adolescents are primarily consumers rather than producers, and most of their income is “disposable” income that can be spent on leisure-oriented consumer goods rather than basic necessities.

In the neoliberal metropolis this passive subjectivity of the young person as consumer has largely subsumed the “ideal” (if, admittedly, white-male-privileged and exclusionary) modern subject of civic agency. In the new information-driven economy technological breakthroughs (primarily the development of virtually instantaneous global communications) are thought to have enabled the compression of time and space such that a surplus of material wealth is produced, making the struggle to satisfy basic “needs” increasingly irrelevant for more and more people, and elevating “desire” as the principal concern of the late modern subject. In *Le Système des objets*, published in 1969, Jean Baudrillard invokes the relationship of Jérôme and Sylvie from Perec’s *Les Choses* to argue that the distinction between use value and exchange value is no longer tenable in late capitalism; everything has become exchange value – a sign, a fetish, an object of consumption. The traditional relationship of humans to their material objects is one of use, and in this relation the objects bear a trace of their usefulness to humans and a trace of the interdependence between humans. But in late modernity, Baudrillard argues, all relations between humans and the material objects they consume have become mere references that describe an absent relation – a “void” which always expresses a desire that can, by definition, never be achieved. He illustrates this by reference to the fetishized household objects in Jérôme and Sylvie’s apartment – Jérôme and Sylvie do not so much “use” these objects as “desire” them:

This signifying configuration of objects is impoverished, schematic, and bound, where the *idea of a relation*, unavailable to experience, merely repeats itself over and over again. Leather couch, phonograph, bric-a-brac, jade ashtrays: it is the *idea of a relation* that is signified in these objects, “consumed” in them, and consequently annulled as a lived relation. (*Selected Writings*: p. 23-24)¹

¹ I am quoting from a volume of Baudrillard’s *Selected Writings* translated into English: Baudrillard, Jean, *Selected Writings*, edited and with an introduction by Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, which contains Chapter 2, «The System of Objects», a translation of p. 255-83 of *Le Système des objets* (Paris:

Elsewhere, Baudrillard has described what I would call the “infantilizing” effect of this signifying system of objects. Confronted with a glut of information, the masses are entangled in a network of media discourses, completely “informed” by the media, which is the same thing as being “formless”. The individual is in a “double bind”, which, Baudrillard argues, is exactly like that faced by young people in the transition to adulthood:

They are at the same time told to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible, free, and conscious, and to constitute themselves as submissive objects, inert, obedient, and conformist. The child resists on all levels, and to these contradictory demands he or she replies by a double strategy. When we ask the child to be object, he or she opposes all the acts of disobedience, of revolt, of emancipation; in short, the strategy of a subject. When we ask the child to be subject, he or she opposes just as obstinately and successfully a resistance as object; that is to say, exactly the opposite: infantilism, hyperconformity, total dependence, passivity, idiocy. (Baudrillard 1988: p. 218)

Autonomous «subject resistance» is generally considered positive «in the same way as in the political sphere only the practices of liberation, of emancipation, of expression, of self-constitution as a political subject are considered worthwhile and subversive». But the «strategic resistance» of refusal of meaning and of speech, “of the hyperconformist simulation of the very mechanisms of the system”, is, Baudrillard concludes, the «winning» strategy of postmodernity, «because it is the most adapted to the present phase of the system» (Baudrillard 1988: p. 218).

Houellebecq’s Michel is, I think, the sort of subject that Baudrillard describes in this passage. But, unlike Baudrillard, Houellebecq can’t quite imagine this kind of resistance as a «winning strategy». In any case, to the extent that this description accurately characterizes the conditions of ideological subject-formation in late modernity, it places academic humanists at the forefront of democratic struggle. If the traditional process of *Bildung* is no longer an effective means of producing democratic agency, other means must be found, and academic humanists should devote themselves to this task. The fact that culture, and specifically the teaching of literature, is now threatened by the pressure to transform higher education into a

Gallimard, 1968), translated by Jacques Murrain, and Chapter 7, «The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media», a speech given by Baudrillard that was translated by Marie Maclean and originally published in *New Literary History* 16:3 (Spring 1985), p. 577-89.

neoliberal enterprise suggests that the university continues to be a viable site for democratic empowerment.

***Bildung* and the Neoliberal University**

Among the many recent critiques of the neoliberal re-structuring of higher education Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* is notable for its attempt to situate the crisis of the humanities in relation to the conflict between the tradition of cultural *Bildung* and the market conditions of transnational capitalism. Following Humboldt, Readings identifies two founding concepts of the modern university – culture and critique. The German Idealists imagined the university as a microcosm of the national community in which individuals' relationships to each other are mediated by the abstract idea of the state. This model of community fosters an illusory sense of individual singularity or difference; though the subject is addressed as an individual member of the community, community is only possible insofar as each individual is similarly constructed as a civil subject. Thus, the concept of community in modernity was inherently universalizing, Readings concludes, «in that it was based on the implicit assumption of a shared human capacity for communication» (p. 182). While nothing guarantees that this capacity will exist, a key role of the university was to promote culture as the locus of community-formation in modern society. In late modernity, however, the university's mission has shifted from guaranteeing the social bond to a new mission of developing «human resources» for the marketplace. «The University no longer has to safeguard and propagate national culture», according to Readings, «because the nation-state is no longer the major site at which capital reproduces itself» (p. 13). What formerly gave the university its meaning, then, is rapidly being abandoned because the old coordinates are no longer functional. Like the objects in Jérôme and Sylvie's apartment, cultural treasures are reduced to empty signifiers of consumer desire.

Developing this idea in the context of the crisis of the humanities, Readings proposes May 1968 as the moment of gendering and racializing the student body – that is, the moment at which the student “body” becomes differentiated sexually and racially rather than unified in a narrative of white male *Bildung*. In the following passage he is speaking specifically about the student revolts in France, but also about western universities in general:

1968 marks the entry of the student body into the sphere of the University, an entry that meant the University could no longer be understood in terms of the story of an individual subject's passage through it [...] The questions of gender, class and ethnic difference among the

students were all repeatedly and urgently part of the student program [...] Understanding 1968 requires recognizing how events broke with a certain narrative of the University education as the individual experience of emancipation in the passage of a virtual student from ignorance to knowledge, from dependence to autonomy and competence. 1968 broke with that narrative precisely insofar as the students were revolting as students, not as would-be professors. (Readings 1996: p. 144)

After 1968, then, the «University of Culture», in which the student could imagine “himself” as the hero of the institution was rendered obsolete. Meanwhile, in the «University of Excellence» – the neoliberal market university – the potential for students to engage in progressive (not to mention “revolutionary”) political critique is lost in the convergence between consumerism and identity politics. Both discourses are predicated on a logic of «lifestyle choices». The students’ rejection of the narrative of *Bildung* in the name of an «uncertainty about maturity, about labor, about wealth, about class, about gender», Readings asserts, goes along with a radical pragmatism and a refusal of vanguardism. For Readings all of these shifts – the disintegration of the nation-state, the disappearance of the bourgeois public sphere, and the post-1968 students’ rejection of the unified subject of *Bildung* – spell the end of the university as we have known it.

These trends are alarming to those of us who are concerned to preserve the academy as a space of free inquiry and critique. But I think it should be possible to develop a new critical *Bildung* embracing the progressive and cosmopolitan aspects of globalization and leveraging the pressures for increased vocationalization of the university toward an expansion of access to critical humanities education. Novelists continue to revive the genre of *Bildungsroman*, even as they reject the traditional pattern in which the protagonist is successfully integrated into a society that promises a measure of freedom and dignity for the individual. This suggests to me that the goals of the *Bildungsroman* have not been superseded, however difficult it has become to imagine the realization of those goals. The task before us is simply to recognize humanity in the fullest sense of which we are capable; to try to say «nothing that is human is alien to me» with a straight face.

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