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Toward an Ethics of Close Reading in the Age of Neo-Liberalism

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THIS ARTICLE CONSISTS OF A SUGGESTION TOGETHER WITH AN ARGUMENT TO persuade you to consider the suggestion. I suggest that close reading would be a good thing for us (U.S.-based scholars of Latin American literature and culture) to do more of in the present. Stated so baldly, the suggestion no doubt begs a number of questions, which may already appear in your mind as objections: What do I mean by “close reading”? By “good”? By “the present”? None of these terms bears a self-evident meaning. Accordingly, my argument comprises an extended reflection upon and response to each of these questions such that you will feel persuaded to consider my suggestion as viable, or maybe just as worth some thought.

I have sought to elaborate what I mean by “close reading,” by “ethics,” and by an “ethics of close reading” through an instance of the practice I am advocating: an ethical close reading, in this case of the twentieth-century

Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernández. By contrast, you might understand my reflections on the present, with which the essay concludes, as a prelude to something like a heterogeneous, collaborative close reading of the present itself. With them, I mean only to sketch a necessarily partial perspective on how our discipline has in recent years engaged the literary and cultural production of Latin America and of how, from that perspective, an ethics of close reading may be a fruitful avenue for future work. In that sense, those final reflections might also be read as a contextual preface to the close reading that in fact precedes them. In that case, that close reading not only serves to build its own concept, but also as a first offering of the kind of work I am suggesting might benefit us.

1. TO WRITE THE OTHER

In one of the most commented upon passages in Felisberto Hernández's work, the narrator of *Around the Times of Clemente Colling* begins his tale by telling his reader:

I'll also have to write many things I know very little about; it even strikes me that impenetrability is intrinsic to them. Perhaps when we think we know them we stop knowing that we don't know them, because their existence is inevitably obscure, and that must be one of their qualities.

But I don't believe I have to write [*debo escribir*] only what I know, but also the other [*lo otro*]. (2002c, 23; 2002a, 3, translation modified)

The narrator declares his intention, indeed, his responsibility “to write the other,” that which he does not know, which in this passage appears related to the “intrinsic impenetrability” of things. He marks the limits of our knowledge of things. However, in doing so, he also carefully insists that our relationship with things exceeds the relationship available to us through “knowing.” In other words, the narrator affirms that we may still be in relation with things even when we do not know them—an important, albeit easily forgotten relation that actually depends upon our *not* knowing them *and* upon our knowing that we do not know them. What's more, he specifies writing as a

practice through which that other aspect of things, and our other zone of relation with them, might be unfolded.

This passage from Felisberto furnishes me with a first, very condensed if not cryptic, formulation of the sort of relation I consider constitutive of the practice of close reading. I will suggest viewing close reading as an exploration, and in that way as an unfolding of what we do not know in texts (and, figuratively speaking, in things) and therefore also as a cultivation of what I will call unknowing relating. But there is much to elaborate in this formulation, many questions to consider. What does “knowing” mean here? How does one understand “things” and “responsibility” such that one declares a responsibility to write them in a certain way? If there is more to our relation with things than knowing, what is it? If it is writing, then how, for that matter, could one “write the other” without drawing that which is unknown in things—the other—back into the circle of the known, thereby undoing one’s own stated aim in writing? What would that writing look like?

A number of critics have explored this passage (Díaz 2000, 178–79; Graziano 1997, 14–15; Lasarte 1981, 10, 46, ff.; Merrim 1987, 526). Like most of them, I take it as a key to exploring Felisberto’s prose. However, my understanding of the nature of that key differs significantly from that of other critics. Though critics vary in their definition of “the other” (the fantastic, memory, marginal zones of subjectivity), they all suppose that Felisberto signals his intention to *represent* “the other.” “The other,” from this point of view, is something (an object) that exists prior to and outside of Felisberto’s writing. Felisberto (the subject) then desperately but fruitlessly seeks to capture and represent in that writing. This impossible desire to represent “the other,” this endless chase after an elusive object of representation then serves, according to this argument, as a kind of inexhaustible, ever-renewable fuel supply driving Felisberto’s neurotic production and imbuing it with a haunting and dim, repetitious strangeness.

However, none of these commentaries take into account what most strikes me when I look at the passage: the absence of a preposition between “escribir” and “lo otro.” In the passage I cited above, Felisberto does not write “to write about” [*escribir de*] or “to write on” [*escribir sobre*] “the other.” Grammatically, a preposition indicates the position of one thing relative to another.

As such, it divides as much as it unites because its very relational function presupposes a prior distinction between the two things. If Felisberto had declared his intention “to write *about* the other,” for example, the preposition “about” would indicate that “to write” is one thing (the activity of a subject) and “the other” is another thing (the preexisting, external object) and that “the writing” will represent “the other.” It seems to me, in such a formulation, that writing would transform the “impenetrability of things” once again into an object of knowledge. In so doing, it would generate only that instance of knowing that occurs when, as Felisberto put it above, “we stop knowing that we don’t know,” and thus would frustrate absolutely the task that the narrator sets for himself as a writer: namely, to write the impenetrability of things and so preserve a zone of unknowing relating. As it stands, however, the absence of a preposition—as in simply “to write the other”—indicates a different kind of relation, one constituted without subjects or objects and thus much more in keeping with a key feature of Felisberto’s prose as I will show momentarily. This understanding of writing permits it to constitute, emphasize, and preserve a relation of unknowing with things.

2. A WORLD OF HANDS

I want to begin to flesh out the notion of this mode of relating that Felisberto describes as “to write the other” and that I associate with close reading by introducing you to one of Felisberto’s stories. I’ve chosen to work with Felisberto’s writing, frankly, because I enjoy reading his stories and thinking about them. But I believe the affinity is felicitous since Felisberto must surely be one of the last writers that anybody looking seriously for tools with which to think through the politics of the present would consider. Felisberto’s politics in life were overtly conservative (Díaz 2000, 125–29). And his semifantastic, heavily introspective short tales, when they situate themselves in a recognizable world at all, do so in a nostalgically tinted Montevideo of the first part of the twentieth century or in the seemingly timeless provincial towns of Argentina and Uruguay of the same period. In that sense, if it is possible to find something of ethical value for our time through a close reading of Felisberto, then perhaps it will be possible to do so in other writers who

in the recent scholarly climate have fallen out of favor on account of the difficulty of assimilating their themes and styles to prevailing categories of cultural and political analysis.

Felisberto first published “Except Julia” in the Buenos Aires literary review *Sur* (no. 143) in 1946. It was then included in as part of his celebrated 1947 collection of short stories entitled *Nadie encendía las lámparas* (*Nobody Used To Turn On the Lamps*).¹ Like so many of his tales, the narrator of “Except Julia” recalls a brief, strange, and random encounter. In this case, the narrator bumps into a former school friend (a brief recollection of their school days serves as the one paragraph introduction to the tale) in an antique shop in Montevideo. Following a brief exchange—partly conventional, partly cryptic—the friend invites the narrator out to his country home. There, he introduces the narrator to an odd ritual. In a long dark tunnel on the property, an assistant to the friend lays out on a long counter-top along the right-hand wall a series of everyday objects. Opposite these, along the left-hand wall, four girls kneel on prayer stools, their heads covered in shawls. The ritual, which occurs at dusk, involves the friend walking through the pitch-black tunnel alternately feeling the objects and touching the girls’ faces. Afterwards, he retires to a sofa in his room where he ruminates on what has occurred in the tunnel that day. The narrator participates in the ritual several times. The story concludes with a slight twist when the father of Julia—one of the girls, all of whom are also employees in the friend’s antique shop—informs the friend that he may no longer touch his daughter’s face in the tunnel, unless of course they are engaged. The friend admits to loving Julia, but cannot marry her because Julia doesn’t want him to touch anyone else’s face in the tunnel. The story ends with the narrator silently reaching out to place his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Except Julia” shares with most of Felisberto’s prose a strikingly peculiar treatment of subjects and objects (Díaz 2000, 165–71; Calvino 1993, ix; Martínez 1998, 124–25). By subject I mean those entities—most often human beings—to which we attribute any or all of the following: consciousness, interiority (or psychological depth), reason, volition, agency (the capacity to initiate action), and life. Conversely, by object I mean those entities that we tend too think of as flat (in the sense of lacking psychological depth),

incapable of rational thought, passive, and inanimate. Within this framework, and with an eye toward Felisberto's prose, it's worth noting that human limbs form a special case: they may be viewed as objects of external actions ("The sofa crushed my toe" or "He dropped the sofa on my toe"), as objects of human will ("I opened my eyes"), as (sometimes merely implied) extensions of human subjectivity acting upon objects ("I kicked the stone" or "I kicked the stone with my foot"), or as both objects of will and extensions of subjectivity ("I opened my eyes and saw the sunrise"). Now, in Felisberto's prose, passages abound in which his writing endows objects—furniture, pencils, paving stones, windows, pianos, but also human limbs, to name just a few—with affect, desire, and will and thus transforms them into bizarre quasi-animate subjects. Equally common are the moments in which his writing objectifies animate subjects who are left helplessly to observe as their limbs or, more strangely still, their mental functions and affective states carry out actions that the subject has not willed.

However, what I have just introduced as two distinct processes in fact could be viewed better as a single complex dynamic. For when Felisberto objectifies a human subject, he turns that subject into an object of the sort that exists in Felisberto's world, that is, an object that has already assumed some degree of subjectivity. And conversely, when Felisberto endows his objects with subjectivity, they become the sort of subjects that Felisberto has already in some ways objectified. So it is not merely that he treats objects as if they were alive and subjects as if they were objects, simply exchanging the contents of categories that otherwise remain unaffected. Ultimately, the combined dynamics dissolve the categories each other, to create a fictional world in which we can only really use the terms "subject" and "object" to designate something like Platonic ideals, terminal states, or poles that never actually exist as such in that fictional world and so do not help us to make sense of that world. Everything that does exist in that world—Being, in short—rather floats and shifts somewhere in a hazy intermediate zone between those only abstractly existent end-points. Let me illustrate this by looking at how it works in "Except Julia," paying special attention to what it there implies about thinking and about knowing and therefore about that process Felisberto called "to write the other," which I have likened to close reading.

“Except Julia” begins with the following recollection: “In my last year of school I kept seeing a big black head leaned [*apoyada*] against a green wall” (2002b, 84; 1974, 87, trans. modified). The narrator makes no reference to the person whose head it presumably is, nor to the body to which it presumably is attached, and consequently the head appears, on the one hand, as a solitary, detached object leaned against the green wall. However, on the other hand, we *do* presume that it is attached to a body, and probably even (given the setting of a school) to a living body. Thus a kind of tension is created in which the head is at one and the same time presumed to be part of a living body and manifestly a detached, isolated object. This alone would complicate a simple identification of subject and object and an account of the relations between them since a significant tradition within modern philosophy and everyday speech has located (even if sometimes only figuratively) many of the constitutive features of subjectivity in the human head. But such identifications are complicated further by the grammatical function of the isolated head as the subject of an action: to lean. In that sense, the volition and agency that we would normally attribute to the human being shifts at least partly over to that human being’s (isolated) head. On the other hand, the verb “to lean” is given in its past participle form [*apoyada*], which in this case allows for the possibility not only that the head leaned itself against the wall, but also that it was leaned against the wall by some other agent, who might or might not still be present (or attached to the head, for that matter).

As the narrator fills out the image of the memory, he complicates further subject and object categories and relations, even as he implicitly resolves the ambiguity surrounding the initially apparently detached head: “The boy’s curly hair wasn’t very long, but it had invaded his head like a creeper vine” (2002b, 84; 1974, 87, trans. modified). Though the narrator has now restored the head to its conventional position on a body belonging to a person, the complication of subject–object relations persists in the description of the hair, which “invades” the head rather than growing out of it. This simple shift significantly dislocates the presumed subject of the description (the classmate) by drawing attention to the obvious (and so ignored) biological fact that hair grows independently of the subject’s will and indeed even after he has died. The hair’s growth expresses the existence of life as a force

independent of any particular life, as well as the intersection of that force with a particular organism. The hair not only invades (as though it were the subject, and a subject originating somewhere outside the boy's body), but in growing (it "covered his brow, came over his ears and went down his neck to the point of creeping into his blue velour jacket"), it appears imbued with some sort of vital force that also exists outside of and independent of the boy. And yet the hair is attached to the boy's head and, indeed, invades it, scrambling—rather than merely reversing—the qualities we tend to distribute in a mutually exclusive way among subjects and objects.

Things get no clearer even when the narrator turns his attention to the boy's behavior, and thus to what we might typically expect to provide us with something like a window on his subjectivity. For we are told only that the boy "always was still and almost never did his homework nor studied his lessons" (2002b, 84; 1974, 87, trans. modified). From there we learn that he was sent home, that the narrator volunteered to accompany him (ostensibly to inform the boy's father that the teacher wished to speak with him), and that, despite numerous conditions and obstacles imposed by the suspicious teacher, the two boys instead spent the afternoon at the park, vowing never to return to school. But at no moment are we given any information that would indicate that the boy has *any* interiority, any psychological depth, or any thoughts at all, let alone what its contents might be.

Thus, from the very outset, "Except Julia" not only dislocates and in fact disperses and distributes the qualities of subjectivity among objects (head and hair) that ought not possess those qualities, but also refuses to depict the living human subject as possessing any distinguishing personal psychology. At the same time, because head, hair, and boy are nonetheless clearly related to one another, we cannot simply rest, disquieted perhaps but content, in the sense that the boy is a lifeless object, and the detached and isolated head and hair are the animated subjects. Rather, it is as though head, hair, and boy are articulated facets of a single force, which both constitutes and is constituted by them, that both act and are acted upon. In relation to that complex, the categories of subject and object wind up highlighted not only as constructions, but also as rather feeble constructions that don't give us much of a practical purchase on the reality of this world.

This complex treatment of the categories of subject and object also manifests itself in relation to the four girls in the tunnel. On the one hand, the girls are perhaps obviously “objectified” in what seems to be, as a friend of mine put it, a “creepy” way. Not only do they kneel opposite—and so in some ways mirror—the literal objects that line the counter-top on the right side of the tunnel, but they kneel motionless and silent, and, of course, are touched by the friend in the same way that he touches the objects in the tunnel. On the other hand, every time we witness the friend’s passage through the tunnel, the girls directly transgress its rules and in so doing display the kind of autonomy we’d conventionally associate with a subject: now speaking up, now bringing in an object of their own (2002b, 90, 93, 94, 96; 1974, 95, 99, 101, 103). In this way, the girls, like the literal objects in the tunnel and the friend himself, occupy what I’d call an ontological position—I mean, simply, a kind of being—in which they are both objects and subjects; or, perhaps more precisely, they are not quite objects and not quite subjects and in this way help to contribute to the overall disruption of those categories. What’s more, as I’ll show below, these transgressions, which surprise and disorient and at times anger the friend, are shown to be essential to the proper functioning of the tunnel ritual.

Beyond these facets of the story, this dynamic in “Except Julia” plays itself out most frequently in relation to hands. I want to dwell a bit on that because it leads directly to the issue of modes of knowing and of relating without knowing. At various points in the tale, the narrator describes his friend’s hands as either separate or separable living object-subjects: “his hand began to flutter without knowing where to land,” “his hand had landed on the side of a jar, lifted its index finger and it appeared as if that finger were going to sing” (2002b, 84; 1974, 88, trans. modified); “they [his hands] appeared to be waiting for objects or maybe faces to approach them” (2002b, 85; 1974, 89, trans. modified); “he was sowing his fingers in the dark; later he would gather them again and they would all reunite on the face of a girl” (2002b, 90; 1974, 95, trans. modified). In all these cases, hands take on the qualities of subjects, with consciousness and affective states that are independent of those of the friend. In each case, as the hands-as-subjects assume the foreground, the friend himself recedes toward the background. In no case, however, is the

link between them entirely severed, nor do the attributes of subjectivity or objectivity fall entirely to the friend or to his hands at the exclusion of the other. Rather, as I mentioned above in relation to Felisberto's prose more generally, and as I showed in the story's opening passage, the descriptions generate a kind of hazy, middle zone.

A similar tension appears when the narrator himself experiences his own hands as semiautonomous subject-objects. This occurs on his second visit through the tunnel:

I began to touch a large mass of sandy material. That didn't interest me; I distracted myself thinking that soon the light of the first girl would be turned on; but *my hands continued to be distracted* by the mass. After that, I touched some tasseled material and suddenly realized it was gloves. I paused thinking about *the significance that would have for my hands* and that they were somehow *a surprise for them and not for me*. While I touched a piece of glass it occurred to me that *my hands wanted to try on the gloves*. I was ready to do it; but I paused again; I seemed like a father who didn't want to indulge all his daughters' whims. (2002b, 93; 1974, 100, trans. modified, my emphasis)

The narrator, in response to an "uninteresting" sensation (the narrator has already deployed "uninteresting," like many academics, as a synonym for displeasing and in that sense as a misnomer since the experience of displeasure presupposes interest), directs his attention to a different thought. His hands however appear capable of distracting *themselves* and do so, significantly, by engaging precisely that "uninteresting" material from which the narrator wished to distract *himself* (or rather his thoughts). Moreover, this conflict of wills intensifies when the hands "want" to try on gloves and the narrator paternalistically refuses their wishes. Even as he attempts to decree subjective dominion over his hands, the narrator must acknowledge that the hands are capable of expressing their own desires, affects, and volition. Then, as if to shore up his faltering sense of subjective dominion over a world of objects that includes his own hands, the narrator concocts a diagnosis that he displaces onto his friend: "My friend was too advanced in that world of hands. Perhaps he had made them develop inclinations that permitted them to live

too independent a life” (2002b, 94; 1974, 100, trans. modified). The narrator attempts to reassure himself with respect to his sanity and coherence as a subject by distinguishing himself from the extreme condition of his friend; a condition characterized precisely by the dissolution of the boundaries between subject and object.

Nevertheless, this reassurance doesn’t hold as his thoughts return to “the flour that with so much pleasure my hands had touched in the previous session” and he says to himself “raw flour pleases hands” (2002b, 94; 1974, 100). Perhaps predictably, since his hands appear to be guiding his thoughts again, the narrator then does what he “could to leave that idea and I came back to the glass I had touched before” (2002b, 94; 1974, 100). Behind the glass he feels a frame. And so he begins to attempt to know what the object is: “Was it a portrait? And how could one know? It could also be a mirror. . . . Worse still.” Disheartened by his failure to know the identity of the object his hands are feeling, and now no longer even possessing the illusion that he, as a subject, is master of his thoughts, body, or the world around him, he concludes, “I found myself with my imagination tricked and the darkness making fun of me” (2002b, 94; 1974, 100, trans. modified).

3. UNKNOWING

The narrator’s own experience of the complication of subject–object relations leaves him disoriented and discouraged. But the way he presents that experience reintroduces the theme with which I began my discussion and that is, in fact, a central theme running through “Except Julia”: the theme of knowing. “How could one know?” the narrator asks himself of the piece of glass he handles in the dark tunnel, and he seems to fall into a modest panic at the realization that he can’t know. It may, however, be the moment in which he realizes implicitly just what the tunnel and the ritual—“that world of hands” into which the anxious narrator claims his friend is “too far advanced”—are designed to provoke: the experience of relating without knowing. Now, when I say “knowing” in this case, I am referring to idea of knowledge implied in philosophy by the “correspondence theory” of truth, whereby we may be said “to know” something when we have formed in our minds an idea of an

object or state of affairs in reality that adequately represents that object or state of affairs as it actually exists outside of our mind (James 2000b, 319). John Dewey called it the “spectator notion of knowledge” to emphasize its dependence on a prior conceptual division of what there is (Dewey called it “experience”) into subjects (the knower) and objects (the known, or to be known), set off against each other and presumed to be free of mutual implication (Dewey 1917, 31). Let me explore now what the “world of hands,” with its undoing of this tradition subject–object division, implies for knowing.

When the narrator’s friend first reveals to him the ritual of the tunnel, he describes the physical configuration and then explains, “I will touch the objects and try to guess what they are. I’ll also touch the faces of the women and think that I don’t know them” (2002b, 85; 1974, 89, trans. modified). Some readers assume that the experience is a kind of game whose object stresses knowing, the discovery of a secret (Rosario-Andújar 1999). However, in my opinion, the point of the ritual is actually to suspend the knowledge that the friend already possesses of the everyday objects and the familiar girls in the tunnel. The emphasis, in other words, is on the process of guessing (rather than on guessing correctly) and on the process of imagining (rather than on knowing who they are). It is, we might say, a process of *unknowing* that interests the friend. This would account for why, when he describes his assistant Alejandro’s composition of the tunnel as a work of art, the friend also admits that he used to “waste terribly” Alejandro’s effort by asking questions about the identity of the objects (2002b, 88; 1974, 92–93) and why he reproaches the narrator when the latter himself asks Alejandro what it is (2002b, 90; 1974, 95). It would also account for why the friend tells the narrator, after their second passage through the tunnel together, “Today was very pleasing. I confused objects, thought of other, different ones and had unexpected memories. I’d barely moved my body in the darkness when it seemed to me I was going to bump into something strange, that my body would begin to live in another way and my head was about to understand something important” (2002b, 95; 1974, 102).

It is not that the friend is *never* unhappily surprised in the tunnel—after all, he is “only human” (and certainly the *narrator* doesn’t seem altogether comfortable with the uncertainty the tunnel ritual so effectively produces).

Indeed, at several points while *in* the tunnel, the friend expresses confusion, frustration, and even anger when someone—usually one of the girls—transgresses the rules of the tunnel by stepping out of their expected (and assigned) function: the girls, for example, spontaneously alter their order of appearance in the tunnel, bring in objects with them (though this is forbidden), and speak to the friend out of turn. Though evidently thrown by these moments, the friend apologizes for his outbursts and, moreover, after he has exited the tunnel expresses delight at the surprises. We see, in other words, a tension within the friend himself between his desire to control the conditions within the tunnel and the pleasure he takes when events in the tunnel surprise him, whatever the cause. Expectation and the desire to know and control thus appear to play a role, paradoxically, in the pleasures of unknowing. It might therefore be better to see unknowing as a capacitating flow rippling through experience alongside other flows—capacitating or not—such as the quest for certainty, the desire to govern, and so forth. The friend, in that sense, functions in his behavior like a surfer or a hang-glider, who rides various currents (like the wave, the thermal column of air) within a dynamic, fluid context in which a debilitating flow may in the next instant become a capacitating flow (and vice versa). The trick, it would seem, is to recognize these alternations and to adapt to them. The surprises and transgressions that disorient and frustrate the friend are not there by design, so far as we can tell, but the designed conditions of the tunnel and its constitutive elements certainly lend themselves to such moments. And it is these conditions, coupled with the disposition of the friend, that lead to the unsettling, pleasurable experience of unknowing.

Now, silence and darkness in the story appear both as conditions that generate—whether deliberately, as in the tunnel, or incidentally—unknowing by disabling sight and language. Thus, just before entering the tunnel at twilight on the first day, the narrator explains that “the light was now weak and objects fought with it” (2002b, 88; 1974, 93, trans. modified). If the objects struggle with the weak light, it is precisely because *as objects* (and so as opposable to a subject who would know them) they depend on light (and sight) to be clearly distinguishable and identifiable. Of course, part of the point of the story, in my opinion, and contrary to the correspondence theory

of knowledge, is that the fact that an object ceases to be an object (and so, strictly speaking, cannot be known) doesn't mean that it becomes nothing, nor that it can no longer be engaged or related to. In that same fading light in which the objects begin to struggle, the friend "groped his way through the trees and plants" (2002b, 88; 1974, 93, trans. modified). Touch precisely becomes the means to relate in the absence of sight. And if the friend doesn't "know" exactly what he is feeling in the twilight, his hands offer him an experience and enough of an idea to allow him to navigate his way, just as they do within the deliberately darkened tunnel.

But hands do not only compensate for the loss of vision an unknowing relating in place of the representational knowing associated with sight. They also spring into action when the representational function of language breaks down or is suspended. There are several instances of this, including the final scene of the story, in which the narrator responds to his friend's predicament not with words but by laying a hand on his shoulder. A still more notable example appears in a passage I partially quoted earlier, when the narrator first runs into his old friend and the friend tries to communicate the nature of his situation. The friend explains of the four girls who work in the store:

—They are very good to me; and forgive me my . . .

Here he made a silence and his hand began to flutter without knowing where to land; but his face had made a smile. I said to him, partly in jest:

—If you have some sort of . . . strangeness that afflicts you, I have a doctor friend . . .

He didn't let me finish. His hand had landed on the edge of a jar; lifted its index finger and it looked as if that finger were going to sing. Then my friend told me:

—I love my . . . illness more than life. Sometimes I think I'm going to be cured and a fatal hopelessness [*desesperación mortal*] comes over me.

—But what . . . is that?

—Maybe one day I will be able to tell you. If I were to discover that you are among the people who can aggravate my . . . sickness, I would give you that chair with the mother-of-pearl inlay that your daughter liked so much. (2002b, 84–85; 1974, 88, trans. modified)

Five sets of ellipsis mark, in a dozen or so lines of text, the failure of language to represent the situation. On the narrator's side, the silences appear to mark his ignorance not only of the nature of the situation but of what words to use even to ask about it. (He can only assume that the friend is somehow sick; just as he later concludes that the narrator is "too advanced in that world of hands"—"advanced" [*avanzado*] perhaps not only in the spatial sense of a "world of hands," but also connoting the progress of an illness.) As for the friend, the silences seem to mark both his difficulty in finding a word to represent the situation and also—as when he "makes a silence"—an affirmation of communication without words. It is here that his hands spring into motion, and it is his hand that ultimately "sings" his strong affirmation of his condition—a condition we can now see as similar to what John Keats, describing the genius of Shakespeare, called "negative capability": "to be capable of being in mysteries, doubts, and uncertainties, without the irritable grasping after fact and reason" (Keats 1970, 43).

The friend's world is indeed a "world of hands," a world in which both sight and language have been disabled (or at least drastically restricted) so as to unleash a protagonism of hands. The answer to the narrator's rhetorical question "How could one know?," of course, is a simple one: one *cannot* know because the entire configuration is designed to suspend knowing and to facilitate instead an unknowing engagement with the apparently familiar that leaves its participants disoriented and uncertain. But this is not to say that they stop thinking. On the contrary, a key component of the ritual for the friend occurs after he exits the tunnel and has gone to his room in solitude and, again, silence. There, just as in the tunnel, he explains to the narrator, "I feel ideas brush by me that are on their way somewhere else" and "memories that do not belong to me" (2002b 91; 1974, 97, trans. modified).

Now, knowing, as conceived within the correspondence theory of knowledge, is first of all an individual personal matter. I form my mental picture of what is in the world and it is my mental picture. Of course, if I wish to test (or to communicate) my knowledge, I must share that mental picture with a social group who will, according to whatever guidelines or conventions it has established, verify or falsify my idea. But the idea is mine, formed within the privacy of my own mind, either by my rational processing of the

sensory data I have received or by my logical contemplation of reality. In the “world of hands” of “Except Julia,” however, where such knowledge has been suspended, thoughts appear as *impersonal*. I might say “intersubjective” except that, as we have seen, there aren’t really subjects in “Except Julia.” I am reminded of William James’s wish that “we could say in English ‘it thinks,’ as we say ‘it rains’ or ‘it blows’” (James 2000a, 172), except I suppose that to capture what is going on here, we might need to get rid of the “it.” Like the boy’s hair in the story’s opening lines, thoughts appear to invade and grow like creeper vines. Nor is their final destination predetermined or known at all. They “brush by” on their way “to somewhere else.” “Except Julia,” from this point of view, offers a kind of dramatization of the relation invoked by Felisberto when he speaks of his responsibility “to write the other” and so to unfold an unknowing relation with things and thus a parable for what I call close reading.

4. PURE IMMANENCE

Giorgio Agamben approaches this relation from a different angle in his own close reading of the last essay Gilles Deleuze wrote before he died in 1995, entitled “Immanence: A Life. . . .” Agamben begins his commentary with a reflection on the peculiar punctuation in the title. In particular, he argues that the colon that separates the two terms of the title indicates “neither a simple identity nor a simple logical connection,” but instead “a kind of crossing with neither distance nor identification, something like a passage without spatial movement” (1999, 223). The relation between the two terms, in Agamben’s view, is itself one of “pure immanence,” which is to say, an absolute immanence that is not immanent *to* anything. Deleuze furnishes an example drawn from Spinoza’s ethics in which substance is not immanent to modes, or modes to substance, but rather both “substance and modes” are “in immanence” (Deleuze 2006, 385). To provide a rough but more familiar example that may convey the relation: substance and modes are in immanence in the same way that a wave and water are in immanence. This is the relation that obtains between “to write” and “the other” in Felisberto’s passage “to write the other”: they are in immanence. With this in mind,

Felisberto's texts become the site of an attempt "to write the other" in what Deleuze calls "pure immanence: a life" or, in a different text, "the plane of immanence" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 45).² In "Except Julia," we might then say, "hands" and "the world" are in immanence. And furthermore, since "to write the other" stands for now as my model of the practice of close reading, I'll tentatively reformulate my notion to say now that close reading likewise entails reading the text (whether a literary text, a film, or some other cultural production) in immanence.

In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze (writing with Félix Guattari) cautions that the difficulty and the danger for the philosopher undertaking to think pure immanence is to avoid generating, from within the plane of immanence, a new transcendent term, be it in the form of a transcendent subject or a transcendent object (1994, 44–49). This may be the way to read Felisberto's concern, cited above, that "when we believe we know them we stop knowing that we don't know them" (2002c, 23; 2002a, 3, trans. modified). For to believe we know—"know," again in the correspondence theory sense of the word—is precisely to settle ourselves comfortably into the position of transcendent knowing subject (as well as to consign the stuff of the world to the role of object). It may be why those moments in Felisberto's stories in which some element *transcends* the pure surface of his immanent world in order to distinguish itself as a subject or object inevitably read as some species or another of sadness, as a loss of power, a constraint of freedom; as for example, when the narrator and the friend in "Except Julia" must confront the insistence of Julia and her father that she be an exclusive, transcendent object of affection. It is as though, from the friend's perspective, everything that had been done precisely to liberate himself, Julia, the other girls, and everyday things from the narrowing dialectic of subject and object were at that moment laid to waste, just as he himself confesses to having wasted Alejandro's efforts by asserting his claims, in that case as a transcendent knowing subject, to know definitively what the objects in the tunnel are. Conversely, according to Deleuze in "Immanence: A Life . . .," pure immanence can be distinguished from "everything that makes up the world of subject and object" (2006, 384) and that it "escapes all transcendence, both of the subject and of the object" (385).

We have already seen how in Felisberto's writing "subject" and "object" undergo a transformation from naturalized conventions we rarely notice (let alone question) and without which we feel incapable of functioning grammatically, epistemologically, or ethically to strangely clumsy, alien terms hopelessly incapable of helping us understand (or act in) a world—such as the one given in "Except Julia"—of pure immanence. In this world, human beings and inanimate objects alike appear less like discrete self-identical entities that might assume either position in a dialectical subject–object relation of seeing and knowing and acting, and more like temporary disturbances of being, like waves in the sea, or bubbles in a pot of boiling water, or degrees of heat. Deleuze refers to these entities as "hecceities" (1995b, 181), or as "the singularities or the events which constitute *a life*" and describes them as "impersonal," "singular," and liberated from "the subjectivity and objectivity of what comes to pass" (2006, 386–87; also 1993, 58–61). Deleuze evokes a flow of extrapersonal being—"a life"—that actualizes itself in particular individual lives and of which any given individual life partakes:

A life is everywhere, in all the moments that traverse this or that living subject and that measure lived objects—immanent life carrying events or singularities that effect nothing but their own actualization in subjects and objects. . . . The singularities or the events which constitute *a life* coexist with the accidents of *the life* that corresponds to it, but they are not arranged and distributed in the same way. (2006, 387)

As Agamben explicates the Deleuzian concept: "The plane of immanence thus functions as a principle of virtual indetermination, in which the vegetative and the animal, the inside and outside and even the organic and the inorganic, in passing through one another, cannot be told apart" (1999, 233). It is for this reason, perhaps, that in the course of his experience of the tunnel ritual, the friend begins to experience thoughts and memories that could only be characterized as *impersonal* and that he himself characterizes as "on their way to somewhere else" and as "not belonging" to himself: because those thoughts are flowing along the plane of immanence, indifferent to transcendent determinations of subject and object, mine and not-mine.

5. "CLOSE READING," CONTEMPLATION,
AND THEORY

In the course of his investigation of Deleuze's notion of "a life," Agamben finds that Deleuze describes it in *What is Philosophy?* as "pure contemplation without knowledge" (Agamben 1999, 233; Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 213). "As absolute immanence," writes Agamben, "*a life . . . is pure contemplation beyond every subject and object of knowledge*" (234). This definition recalls for Agamben the "Greek conception of theory as not knowledge but touching (*thigein*)," a connection that immediately returns my argument to Felisberto's formulation "to write the other" and to the "world of hands" of "Except Julia." These now appear to be instances—or perhaps better, expressions—of, alternately, "pure immanence," "a life . . .," "contemplation," and "theory": *a touching without knowledge, beyond every subject and object of knowledge*. And that is how I would like to define the close reading I propose.

Of course, "close reading" already has a definition such that my definition actually entails a redefinition. In the United States, close reading has been tightly associated with the so-called New Criticism, a mode of Anglo-American scholarship that, according to Andrew DuBois, "began between the World Wars and flourished into an institutional dominance that would not be relinquished until sometime during the war in Vietnam" (2003, 2). In its most explicit methodological formulations and often—though by no means invariably—in its practice, New Critical close reading bracketed off the poetic text from any extra-textual concerns. It arose in part as a reaction against a certain mode of Indo-European philological study that tended to utilize literary texts as transparent windows onto the history or "psychology" of a people and in part as a more narrow assault on the anti-modern bias of the canon of literature in English as it was current in that time. Combined with the philosophical and political conservatism of the vast majority of those identified with New Criticism, the exclusion of extra-textual considerations from criticism caused not only New Criticism but also *the practice of close reading* to be strongly identified, in the minds of many critics who came of age amidst the strongly politicized culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as not only outdated but also as stifling and reactionary.³

I do not intend to revisit in detail the history and practice of New Criticism here. Nor do I wish to dwell extensively on the New Critical notion of close reading, let alone to effect a reversal of the institutional history by which it was, rightly, challenged. I do, however, wish to offer, perhaps as an initial way of reorienting the concept of close reading toward something closer to my purposes, the testimony of a graduate student who taught at Harvard in the 1950s using its methods:

Students were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history. Much more humbly and modestly, they were to *start out from the bafflement* that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough *not to hide their non-understanding* behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge. (de Man 1986, 23; my emphasis)

I wish to highlight here in Paul de Man's description that facet of New Critical close reading that I am most interested in carrying forward today when I speak of an ethics of close reading in an age of neo-liberalism: the disclosure, through contemplation, of unknowing.

But there is more to emphasize in de Man's description. First, it is worth noting that it forms part of a chapter of *The Resistance to Theory* entitled "The Return to Philology." Coupled with several other, more recent resuscitations of philology, I feel quite comfortable in associating my proposed definition of close reading with the renovation and reorientation of this discipline, which has done much to unbind philological practice from the extremely conservative nationalisms to which it has been wedded, especially within Hispanism.⁴ Indeed, below I will rather directly evoke an image of friendship with the text (*philo + logos*) and attempt to draw out the ethics of such a friendship. Second, de Man explicitly connects the practice of close reading to "theory." In

de Man's moment, that connection served the rhetorical function of defending theory on the grounds that it was not, after all, so different in its practices and effects from the "close reading" clung to by the "anti-theorists." I am, in this case, interested in that connection for two purposes: first, to defend close reading against those who would define it in opposition to theory; second, to appropriate a particular meaning of "theory" that disrupts some of the assumptions prevalent in U.S.-based Latin American literary and cultural studies about the role of theory in politically aware scholarship.

Here, however, there may be a rub that will be useful to examine since it raises the question of the relations between the practice of close reading and "extra-textual" concerns and responsibilities. In "Science and Reflection," Martin Heidegger (whose notion of theory most directly informs de Man's own conception) points out that, in the Roman transformation of the Greek *theoria* to the Latin *contemplatio*, we find a compartmentalization and a sundering, a separation of thought from life (1977, 166). With this, Heidegger argues, begins a long (Christian) tradition of viewing contemplation as opposed to action and as separated from life. Agamben, meanwhile, reads Deleuze as identifying "pure contemplation without knowledge" with "a life . . .". Heidegger is, of course, correct about that tradition and so raises the question whether the "contemplation" with which I have associated my conception of close reading can actually bear the charge of situating that practice *in* the world.

In fact, however, the Christian contemplative tradition itself already generated—in the form of its most famous twentieth century voice, the late Trappist monk, writer, and *activist* Thomas Merton—a powerful example of and meditation upon the responsibilities of the contemplative to engage the world (Merton 1971, 1972). Moreover, and more directly pertinent to the specific question of the relative worldliness of theory and contemplation, when we look past the simple opposition of the two terms in Heidegger and instead inspect his understanding of the Greek notion of theory, the apparent incommensurability of "theory" with Agamben's notion of contemplation dissolves: "to look attentively on the outward appearance wherein what presences becomes visible and . . . to linger with it" (1999, 163; see also Heidegger 1966). This squares well with Agamben's notion of "living contemplation"

that is “touching without knowledge” and “a pure potentiality that preserves without acting” (234). Both Heidegger and Agamben seek a sustained, thoughtful connection with the world that, however, suspends the urgent imperative to “translate” that thought into some other form of action. In this, Heidegger and Agamben (no less than Merton and Deleuze, for that matter, or William James and John Dewey either) seem concerned to stress the importance of disengaging thought from narrow utilitarian ends while preserving its embeddedness in and ethical responsibility to the life of the world. Theory and contemplation—both of which have long suffered from (at times self-inflicted) accusations of being out of touch with or even closed to life—may be thought of as synonyms for the close reading practice I am advocating. All three—theory, contemplation, and close reading—can most fruitfully be understood today as immanent practices of unknowing engagement with life.

6. INTENSIVE READING AND READING A FRIEND

At the risk of stating the obvious, any practice of close reading in immanence—one that could be considered “theoretical” (de Man and Heidegger) or “contemplative” (Deleuze and Agamben)—could not possibly approach a text as a bounded transcendent object whose illusory borders must be treated as sacrosanct. In his own reflections on the nature of books and reading, Deleuze emphatically opens the book, and so opens the process of close reading, and dissolves the very ideas of subject and object, inside and outside, and thus drives the practice of reading to immanence (or “contemplation” or “theory” or “a life . . .”), and does so in ways that also depend on the ethical dimensions of close reading that I will want to emphasize. “The highest aim of literature,” Deleuze paraphrases Lawrence approvingly, “is ‘to leave, to leave, to escape . . . to cross the horizon, enter into another life. . . .’” (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 36). But Deleuze is quick to point out that this is not a renunciation of action, noting that some “think that fleeing means making an exit from the world, mysticism, or art, or else that it is something rather sloppy because we avoid our commitments and responsibilities. But to flee is not to renounce action: nothing is more active than a flight. It is

the opposite of the imaginary” (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 36). This idea of flight is the famous Deleuzian notion of “deterritorialization.” In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari begin by emphasizing that a book, as they would like it to be understood, “has neither object nor subject. . . . A book is an assemblage. . . . a multiplicity” (1987, 4). A book in this sense for Deleuze and Guattari is not an “image” of the world nor a representation of it and has neither a subject (to which it might be attributed) nor an object (whose image it furnishes). Instead, the book “forms a rhizome with the world, there is a parallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world” (11).

Understanding a book in this way, for Deleuze, demands nothing so much as *thought*: “Think of the author you are writing about. Think of him so hard that *he can no longer be an object*, and equally so that *you cannot identify with him*. Avoid the double shame of the scholar and the familiar” (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 119, my emphasis). Deleuze here describes his own reading practice in terms that suggest also the suspension of dialectical habits of mind that make writers (or texts) into objects or subjects. Such a practice of close reading in immanence, I want to emphasize once more, would also have to shed the transcendent attachment to the boundaries of the text that we find in New Criticism (and in the first sentences of Paul de Man’s description above). That is, if a close reading in immanence were indeed to *begin* with careful attention to the signs on the page of the text under consideration, only a transcendent view of those signs would force us to *end* with them and never to stray from them. The text, in other words, for the kind of close reading I am advocating, would be *open*, contiguous with the world around it—a swatch in the fabric of the world, which is not necessarily (or only) the world in which it was produced but rather also the world in which it is being made to circulate today. Here again, Deleuze offers a formulation I have found useful: “This intensive way of reading, in contact with what’s outside the book, as a flow meeting other flows, one machine among others, as a series of experiments for each reader in the midst of events that have nothing to do with books, as tearing the book into pieces, getting it to interact with other things, absolutely anything . . . is reading with love” (Deleuze 1995a, 9).

Deleuze's accounts of this "intensive way of reading" suggest a way to move beyond the stale, false dichotomy between "close reading," carefully attentive to the workings of a text, and a reading practice that seeks to trace the text's embeddedness in and (political or ethical) engagements with the world (just as we have already seen that close reading need not be opposed to "theory"). In this sense, it already also opens a path by which we could construct any number of conceptions of the politics, if not the ethics, of close reading. I wish now to develop just one of those possible paths, one that will entail another look at the Deleuzian concept of "a life . . ." and at the relations established in "Except Julia." Up to this point, in treating "Except Julia" as something like a parable for close reading, I have cast the friend (and to a lesser extent the narrator, perhaps as apprentice) as the "readers" and the array in the tunnel as the "text." In this way, the story furnishes an instance of and a way of grasping the notion of "to write the other," of an unknowing relating with things. And this is indeed, in my opinion, an indispensable basis for an ethical close reading: the disclosure of uncertainty. However, a second critical dimension of ethical close reading becomes visible when we look at the narrator as the "reader" and the friend (and his "world of hands") as the "text" he reads—in other words, when we see the narrator as a "friend to the text."

I've shown how the narrator portrays the friend, in his opening paragraph, in a way that eludes the categories of both subject and object, and he will repeat this several times in the story. But you may also recall that the narrator "reads" his friend as sick and as too far gone. In view of this, it would appear that the narrator preserves a judgmental distance (as subject) from his "text" (rendered an object) and in this way does not provide an adequate instance of the sort of close reading practice I've been trying to evoke. But this, in fact, is only part of the story and, in my opinion, not the decisive part. For this judgmental, transcendent stance contends in the story with an ethical, immanent relating without knowledge that does indeed instantiate close reading. Indeed, the narrator already experiences this tension between the two stances in his experience of the tunnel itself: now drawing back to ask questions and attempt to reassert his subjective dominion, now yielding to the experience and even achieving what he calls a "near rapture" in the process (2002b, 91; 1974, 96–97).

Similarly, as the reader of his friend, the narrator, for all his attempts to judge from a transcendent position, winds up relating immanently: “touching without knowing.” Already in the childhood classroom, the narrator—who, recall, seems to know nothing of his friend as an object or a subject—volunteers for the “unpleasant” task of accompanying him home only because “to me it seemed possible to do something and save that friend [*compañero*]” (2002b, 84; 1974, 87, trans. modified). Years later, this childhood instance of relating without knowing seems to set the tone for his behavior in the present. Thus, when he first learns of the tunnel ritual, he reflects that

Maybe in those mornings during school, when he left his quiet head leaning against the green wall, there was already some tunnel forming within it. It didn't seem strange to me that I hadn't understood that as we walked through the park; but just as in that time I followed him without understanding, now I should do the same. Anyway, we still preserved the same mutual sympathy and I hadn't learned to know people. (2002b, 86; 1974, 90, trans. modified)

Here he suspends his judgmental stance and vows an unknowing relation with the friend. He then fulfills this vow at the end of the story when, as his friend expresses sadness over the ultimatum that Julia has issued and the fact that he cannot accept her terms, the narrator places his hand on the friend's shoulder. He does not judge the friend's decision, nor attempt to talk him out of it, or to talk sense into him. He simply reaches out to touch him. We do not even know whether or not he feels that he now comprehends the friend, for such comprehension is neither necessary nor pertinent to the narrator's position as a close reader. And indeed, as he puts a hand on his friend's shoulder, he unintentionally brushes his curly hair and feels that he has “brushed an object in the tunnel” (2002b, 98; 1974, 105, trans. modified).

Recall that the friend, during the first, halting conversation about his “condition,” let on that if the narrator were “among those people who could aggravate [his] . . . sickness” the friend would gratefully view it as a gift. I would argue that this—aggravate his friend's sickness—is just what the narrator does first by following and participating together with the friend in the ritual and then, in the concluding lines, by extending the mode of relating he

has learned in the tunnel to his relation with his friend outside the tunnel. Of course, it is critical to emphasize that, within this very context, “aggravating” an “illness” is doubly ironic as a way of describing this solidarity since, in the first place, the narrator’s judgment of the condition as an “illness” is made from a position not of unknowing relating but rather of ignorant detachment, and because, in the second place, the friend’s own designation of his condition as an “illness” arises as a concession to an obviously inadequate language. What’s more, since the friend has already declared that he loves his condition more than life and that the thought of losing it (through a “cure”) nearly kills him, to aggravate, as a reader, the friend’s “illness” appears more now as a resuscitation, as a bringing the friend back to life, or perhaps more precisely, to “a life . . .”

7. THE ETHICS OF “A LIFE . . .”

In literature, Deleuze writes, “there’s an attempt to make life something more than personal, to free life from what imprisons it” (1995b, 143; also Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 171). Of course, in view of my examination of Deleuze’s own accounts of reading, we would be mistaken, I think, to view this statement as an essentializing description of what literature is. For Deleuze, literature is the uses to which it is put. Nor, I should add, need we limit the description as only applicable to literature; Deleuze’s books on Francis Bacon and on cinema show Deleuze putting these arts to similar use. It makes no more sense for the ethical practice of close reading to generate a transcendent category of “literature” or “literariness” than for it to imagine a given text as a fiercely bounded object. Therefore, this statement might be better understood as an account of the use to which Deleuze wants to put literature, or at most, as a tendency he discovers in literature and that he wishes to intensify through his reading practice. In that sense, it would serve well as a description of the narrator’s “close reading” of his friend (as of the friend’s relationship to the things in his world; as of Felisberto’s attempts “to write the other”). In all these cases, we find the attempt to free life (pure immanence; contemplation; theory; unknowing relating) from the personal, which is to say from the transcendent categories of subject and object.

For Deleuze, this attempt, precisely, constitutes an ethics; for “life,” in Deleuze, is already an ethical concept: “A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete potentiality [*puissance*], complete beatitude” (2006, 386, trans. modified). Agamben helps once again to explicate this dense formulation by tracing its implicit sources in Spinoza. The key Spinozist concept here is *conatus*, generally rendered in English as striving. But Agamben begins by looking back at Spinoza’s grammatical exploration of the Hebrew reflexive active verb “as an expression of an immanent cause, that is, of an action in which agent and patient are one and the same person” (1999, 234). Spinoza searches unsuccessfully for Latin equivalents before setting finally on a term in Ladino (the archaic Spanish spoken by the Sephardic Jews in the fifteenth century): *pasearse* “to take a walk” or “to stroll.” “*Pasearse*,” writes Agamben,

is an action in which it is impossible to distinguish the agent from the patient (who walks what?) and in which the grammatical categories of active and passive, subject and object, transitive and intransitive therefore lose their meaning. *Pasearse* is, furthermore, an action in which means and end, potentiality and actuality, faculty and use enter a zone of absolute indistinction.” (235)

Recalling that the point of the grammatical investigation, for Spinoza, was to find a means of expressing an immanent cause, Agamben concludes that “the vertigo of immanence is that it describes the infinite movement of the self-constitution and self-manifestation of Being: Being as *pasearse*” (235).

Agamben now turns to the concept of *conatus*, which Spinoza describes in Propositions 6 through 9 of Book III of the *Ethics* (1989):

All beings not only persevere in their own Being (*vis inertiae*) but desire to do so (*vis immanentiae*). The movement of *conatus* thus coincides with that of Spinoza’s immanent cause, in which agent and patient cannot be told apart. And since *conatus* is identical to the Being of the thing, to desire to persevere in one’s own Being is to desire one’s own desire, to constitute oneself as desiring. *In conatus desire and being thus coincide without residue.* (Agamben 1999, 236)

He then points out that elsewhere in Spinoza the very definition of *conatus* appears as the definition of life and thus establishes a set of textual connections that help explain how it is that, for Deleuze, life as immanence may be construed as absolute potentiality (that is, as the power to constitute oneself as desiring).

To understand more explicitly the ethics to which this gives rise (and so also the idea of a life as immanence as “complete beatitude”), we need to look at Deleuze’s own reading of Spinoza. According to Deleuze, for Spinoza all beings are constituted by a characteristic set of relations (1988, 19; 1992, 217). *Conatus* can, in this sense, be seen as the name given to our desire to persevere in this set of relations (which set of relations, in a reflexive arching back, are constituted so as to desire their own perseverance [1992, 230]). However, in Spinoza’s universe, human beings are in fact built and situated so they are continuously subject to encounters with external bodies, which may either compound or decompose a being’s characteristic or constitutive relations, increase or decrease a body’s power to act. These material effects (of composition or decomposition) are known as affections [*affectio*]. But we experience the passage to a greater or lesser state of perfection (our relations as more or less composed) by way of affects [*affectus*—for example, of joy [*laetitia*] when a body combines with ours or of sadness [*tristitia*] when it decomposes ours (Deleuze 1988, 48–51; Spinoza 1985, *Ethics* III, P11).

The most fundamental practical question in Spinoza’s ethics is how to organize our encounters to achieve more joyful than sad passions (and from there to go on to experience more actions than passions). Indeed, here is where the terms “good” and “bad” come into play in the ethics (Spinoza 1985, *Ethics* IV P31 and P39; Deleuze 1992, 261–62, and 1988, 22–23; see also Hardt 1993, 93–94). For “the good is when a body directly compounds its relation with ours, and, with all or part of its power, increases ours,” and “the bad is when a body decomposes our body’s relation, although it still combines with our parts, but in ways that do not correspond to our essence” (Deleuze 1988, 22). Correspondingly, “that individual will be called *good* (or free, or rational, or strong) who strives, insofar as he is capable, to organize his encounters, to join with whatever agrees with his nature, to combine his relation with relations that are compatible with his, and thereby to increase his power,”

and “that individual will be called *bad*, or servile, or weak, or foolish, who lives haphazardly, who is content to undergo the effects of his encounters, but wails and accuses every time the effect undergone does not agree with him and reveals his own impotence” (Deleuze 1988, 23).

To go from joyful passions to actions we need only to form the idea of *what it is in us* (that is, of the nature of our characteristic, constitutive set of relations) such that a given encounter with an external body gave rise to the affect of joy. Beatitude, for Spinoza, comes in at the moment that we understand that all joyful affect arises from our own power of acting, which power, in turn “immanates from” (meaning, flows forth from without leaving) that single substance, God or Nature (*Deus sive natura*), of which we are a mode. This is how Deleuze arrives at the formulation that absolute immanence is complete beatitude and complete potentiality.

Deleuze distinguishes Spinoza’s ethics sharply from all morality. Spinoza’s ethics demand an investigation and evaluation of relations and their encounters and of the interplay of combining potencies and their effects and, in this way, rests upon an understanding of being as pure immanence, before or beyond subjects and objects (Levinson, 2000). Morality, on the other hand, rests upon a fundamental foreclosure of inquiry and so upon ignorance, reducing a contingent investigation of relations, causes, and effects to a command or judgment (attended by the threat of punishment or the promise of reward) that assumes a knowing subjective consciousness dominating the passions (Spinoza 2004, 63). In this way, Spinoza’s ethics, characterized by a “qualitative difference of modes of existence (good-bad)” displaces morality, “which always refers existence to transcendent values” and judges it in the name of God. Ignorance, I want to stress, is not the problem. It is the ignorance of ignorance, or, to put it in Felisberto’s terms, “to stop knowing that we do not know,” that opens the door to moral judgment and closes off the possibility of ethics. In so closing off ethics, morality, “the system of judgment,” separates us from life: “all these transcendent values that are turned against life, these values that are tied to the conditions and illusions of consciousness. Life is poisoned by the categories of Good and Evil, of blame and merit, of sin and redemption” (Deleuze 1988, 26; Spinoza 1985, *Ethics*, Book I Append.).

Deleuze himself brings this distinction between ethics and morality to bear on the ethics of close reading when he writes:

Herein, perhaps, lies the secret: to bring into existence and not to judge. If it is so disgusting to judge, it is not because everything is of equal value, but on the contrary because what has value can be made or distinguished only by defying judgment. What expert judgment, in art, could ever bear on the work to come? It is not a question of judging other existing beings, but of sensing whether they agree or disagree with us, that is, whether they bring forces to us, or whether they return us to the miseries of war, to the poverty of the dream, to the rigors of organization. . . . This is not subjectivism, since to pose the problem in terms of force, and not in other terms, already surpasses all subjectivity. (1997, 134–35)

To return to the model of ethical close reading provided by the narrator of “Except Julia,” this may be precisely what he was doing in “aggravating” his friend’s sickness in the face of the sad morality of Julia and her father: helping to liberate the potentiality of a life from the transcendent, moralizing forces that would threaten it and doing so, I hasten to stress, though he—*because* he—*did not know* what to think, and despite the fact, indeed, that he himself had vacillated between moral and ethical readings of his friend.

8. TO STOP TO READ

It is perhaps an accident (fortunate or not) that I came to arrive at this notion of an ethics of close reading in part through a prolonged experience with contemplative practice in another tradition, that of Zen Buddhism. In that practice as well, in which one meditates with one’s *eyes open* as a gesture of engagement with the manifold reality of which one remains—indeed in which one is more deeply embedded—through meditation, there is a powerful tradition of refusing the dualistic opposition of contemplation to the life of the world (Batchelor 1990, 1997). While the Korean Chogye tradition in which I have studied and practiced for the past eight years, like other Zen traditions, maintains seated meditation with mindful attention to breath

as its core contemplative practice, it also emphasizes the lesson that *any* activity can be made into an occasion for practice. Some activities, such as walking, may be approached as a formal meditative ritual, although in most cases no formal procedure is applied. Instead, we bring the basic rhythm of returning attention to the concrete task at hand: for example, cleaning a toilet or drinking a cup of tea with both hands. In all these activities, as in seated meditation, when we observe thoughts wandering away from the task in the present moment, down any number of associated affective or speculative paths, we simply and without judgment take note—“thinking”—and return our attention to what we are doing right here, right now: “breathing,” “sweeping,” “eating.”

Over time, with sustained practice, I have found that my mind “settles” on the task at hand with greater ease. My mind disengages from the world to pursue its own fantasies of the past and future with less frequency and duration. In this process, as I sink myself into the complexity of the present, I also develop a powerful, *experiential* awareness of the rich web of material, temporal relations that constitute reality in each unfolding moment. This experience often leads to a heightened sense of ambiguity, as the fully attended-to fact of the present moment exceeds the fixed, fast categories I habitually use to organize and separate the stuff of the world. This sustained encounter with ambiguity then occasions, among other effects, a profound uncertainty and doubt. And this very same doubt and uncertainty, insofar as I am able to abide them (rather than shielding myself from them through distraction or the reassertion of rational categories), provokes what some teachers call *boddhichitta* (sometimes rendered as “tender [both soft and sore] heart-mind”): the concrete experiential, affective ground for spontaneous, compassionate engagement with the world.

As these developments, over the years, emerged more consistently in my contemplative practice, I discovered a specific transformation of my professional reading, writing, and teaching practices. The act of reading for academic purposes became for me a practice that I spontaneously approached much in the way that I approached a mundane practice task at the Temple, such as sweeping the porch. Like many scholars of my generation, I was trained and encouraged to analyze literary texts in relation to their social

and historical conditions of possibility as well as in terms of the ideological functions they, often apparently unwittingly, perform for the different times and places in which they circulate. Behind this approach lies, I believe, a laudable desire to reconnect literature with the world around us, and to recognize the political, if not ethical, dimensions of language and of such intensely language-based activities as reading and writing. However, as my practice intensified, I began to experience a level of complexity and ambiguity both in the texts I approached and in the social situations to which I might have wished to connect them that caused me to feel doubtful of many of the social and political claims I had been making. This is *not* to say that I ceased to experience reading, writing about, and teaching literature as ethically significant acts, meaning acts legitimately concerned with freedom and responsibility, and with the cultivation of friendship and potentiality. It is only to say that I could now only discover the (or rather, an) ethical relevance of my experience of any given text in an unplanned way, arising directly out of the rich and often unsettling experience of mindfully immersing myself in that web of relations that is the text-in-the-world, then giving myself to the largely indeterminate process of communicating my experience of the text with others (in writing or teaching) such that they might develop their own mindful experience of the text and the myriad relations it bears with the extra-textual world around it, past and present.

9. UNKNOWING THE PRESENT

I have described the ethics of close reading—which I have also called contemplation, theory, and philology—as an immanent mode of unknowing relating placed in the service of life as self-constituting desire. In so doing, I have sought to elucidate the first two terms—“close reading” and “ethics”—in the title of my essay. I want now to turn to the final phrase—“the age of neoliberalism”—and to attempt to address the question *Why now?* or, more precisely, *In what ways might close reading ethically engage the present?* Latin America has changed a lot in the past thirty years and so have U.S.-based Latin American literary and cultural studies. In Latin America, the past thirty years might be described generally as the period in which the

utopian revolutionary surge begun by the Cuban revolution in 1959 ceded first to brutal counterrevolutionary reaction and then to a “softer” transition to redemocratization under the aegis of a not-so-soft neo-liberalism. The history of U.S.-based Latin American literary and cultural studies—obviously chronicled in detail elsewhere in this volume—could be described, also in general terms, as an ongoing attempt to regain progressive political footing in the wake of the defeat of the revolution, the appearance of dictatorship, and the transition to neo-liberal democracy.

Of course, a great variety of methods and interests have been brought to bear on that general project. Much of the work that critically revisited the politics of the so-called “Boom” and of literature as an institution in the region more generally could be understood as the analysis of a failure: the failure of literature, specifically, to live up to the emancipatory claims that its authors themselves tied to the revolution (and that any number of authors from various periods made for their own literary production). The influx of theoretical models and reading protocols (drawn from a variety of other disciplines) could likewise be seen as an attempt to shear away inadequately thought-through epistemological and political presuppositions to find a more adequate ground for a progressive intellectual engagement with the region and its culture. The turn, through subaltern studies, to especially the *testimonio* but also, via other methodologies, to other more straight-forwardly extra-literary forms of popular culture might be seen as an attempt to forge intellectual (and in some cases material and practical) alliances with those cultural producers that some U.S.-based Latin Americanists viewed as the next best hope for progressive social change in the region.⁵

I have two strong impressions of these changes, both of which oriented me toward the present work and my proposal for close reading. The first is that perhaps some kind of cycle has come to a close; a cycle that ended with numerous, extended (quasi-obsessive, I would say) reflections by U.S.-based Latin Americanists on what it means (and often on what it *should* mean) to do this work. And so perhaps with the end of that cycle—which of course did not end in any consensus unless it is the tacit consensus that the cycle should end—U.S.-based Latin Americanists can now continue, though differently, to

pursue more or less the same kinds of interests they had pursued before. The second impression is that in the course of the past thirty years, U.S.-based Latin American studies seems to have erected something like an axiomatic inverse relation whereby the close reading of a cultural (especially, but not exclusively literary) text necessarily precludes the adoption of an appropriately progressive political stance and vice versa. Another way to put this would be that, in our understandable eagerness to do scholarly work that could be said to matter politically in Latin America, we have forgotten to do scholarly work, or perhaps just thrown the baby of close reading out with the bath water of literature as an institution complicit with the state and capitalist modernization.

Given these two impressions, I am pleased and concerned, respectively. First, I am concerned that we have come to fall back on the facile view that what William Paulson calls “literary culture”—not only literary works but also its attendant institutional apparatuses such as publishing, commentary, and teaching (and including especially the practice of close reading, whether the reading is of a poem or a city)—is, *tout court*, antithetical to progressive political thought. To the degree that it exists, I believe this position has examined with care neither the possibilities of literary culture nor the utility of certain received categories of political thought to the present landscape (Paulson 2001b, 75, 106; Said 2004, 83). Secondly, I am pleased that in the wake of a rather stifling wave of self-examination (often carrying surprisingly high institutional stakes), the field is now once again clear for a close, generative engagement with the literature and culture of Latin America, whatever the form of that study.

I’m aware that I’m painting with a very broad brush here—perhaps in a way that violates my own exhortation to close reading—and know and accept that certain important subtleties will be lost in the process. I don’t mean, however, to exclude those subtleties from future discussion, only to suspend them for the moment, partly for reasons of space and partly to create an alternative space in which to offer my suggestion. And this suggestion, I hasten to add, by no means aims to discourage any of these forms (or others) that Latin American literary and cultural studies has taken in the past thirty years. I mean rather to attempt, perhaps over-vigorously and so

clumsily, to encourage a form that seems to have fallen out of vogue in these times of political and social crisis and urgency, in part because in its past incarnations it has never been closely associated with politically engaged, let alone efficacious intellectual work: close reading.

I certainly accept the critical scrutiny that the literary (and older methods for approaching it) have undergone in Latin American studies in the past thirty years. This scrutiny seems intellectually salutary and ethically laudable. Indeed, it is precisely because I accept it just as such that it appears to me that the space is now available for a reengagement of the literary (via the close reading), for a reinvention of close reading, if you will, that might elude the oppressive complicities and gestures of an earlier literary critical practice while furnishing elements that could be critical to our *thinking—as intellectuals and through our academic work*—the age of neo-liberalism. To insist on this is also to admit that none of what I'm saying carries any weight at all when it comes to the various extra-academic activities we might undertake that seek to engage the political reality of Latin America. I am saying, in short, (1) that *as academics* we have a privileged space in which *to think*, (2) that to do so is in itself an ethical and political act, and (3) that close reading of the sort I've described and tried to practice above can be an aid to such thinking. How so?

It is certainly not that we cannot know the basic facts (changes in policies, flows, and exchanges of and among people and goods, etc.) that comprise what we call neo-liberalism. Nor is it that we cannot know the discourses that aspire to support those practices. I am certainly not calling for ignorance. But perhaps rather for modesty and at the same time for invention. One might say, similarly, that the protagonist of "Except Julia" certainly knows the everyday objects as well as the girls in the tunnel. But perhaps he knows them so well that he has forgotten that he doesn't know, and hence the need for the strange-seeming process of "close reading" he undertakes by which he experiences his unknowing of them and thus reconnects to them in a web of immanent relations. Whatever neo-liberalism and its attendant literary and cultural products may be, and however familiar some may appear, I feel safe in saying that they are not identical repetitions of the past. But by hastily applying familiar concepts—in other words, by thinking *we know*—we tend

to forget, as Felisberto cautions, that and what we don't know. And in forgetting that we do not know (and in forgetting, or denying, that we have the luxury not to know for sure), we precisely risk losing touch with the present and rendering contemporary realities mere repetitions of our descriptive and conceptual constructions of past. Ultimately, we wind up fulfilling precisely our worst fear: disengaging thought from the present, we close ourselves off from reality and thus disable other forms of action as well, forms that could well constitute the future that is in the present.

Another way to put this would be to say that in forgetting that we do not know we give up our capacity to think historically, to think the present as an open-ended process emerging in continuity and discontinuity with the past (or pasts) and evolving, again with continuity and discontinuity, into the present (or presents). The point of the relations of unknowing established within the dark tunnel or of an ethics of close reading, of contemplation or of theory seems to me to be to suspend our familiar organs of perception and with them our habitual categories of thought and our mystifications long enough to experience the present differently, freshly, as possibility and difference rather than as the repetition of the already familiar. It would be, as Nietzsche puts it, to think that “historical *connexus* of causes and effects—which, fully understood, would only demonstrate that the dice-game of chance and the future could never again produce anything exactly similar to what it produced in the past” (1997, 170). It would be to draw upon all available resources to think and ethically to evaluate what is new within the present configuration.

This is not to say that such categories as left, right, progressive, populist, revolutionary, market, or even neo-liberal are necessarily useless. Nor is it to abandon a critical stance toward a series of governmental practices and economic policies and processes that have impoverished millions while restricting their economic, political, and social opportunities for self-direction. It is only to say that if such categories are to be a useful component of unfolding such a critical stance, it will be because we refrain from deploying them as preestablished, transcendent, and normative judgments upon the present and instead allow them (and perhaps more importantly whatever new concepts, vocabularies, and ways of seeing or touching the present may

bring us) to spring organically from a close and unknowing engagement with the concrete literary and cultural processes and products of the region.

The same logic may apply to our approach to the canon of Latin American literature (and culture). It may be that we can now “unknow” texts, thinkers, and cultural forms that a previous generation had, for its own possibly appropriate and certainly understandable reasons, discarded. In our capacity as readers, thinkers, writers, and teachers of the literature and culture of Latin America, based here in the United States and so far removed (in some ways, at least) from the region, we might do well to turn the apparent necessity of our limited sphere of direct influence into the virtue of the possibility for sustained, rigorous, and open-ended exploration of the literary and cultural possibilities within the present. These cultural producers—Felisberto Hernández, for instance—are, after all, part of the present as well, at least so long as someone in the present is thinking about them and, especially, thinking the present with them.

Perhaps obviously, the perceptions and categories of thought that would emerge from such an exploration being new ones (even if they bear familiar names), I cannot say what they might be or even, with certainty, that they will be useful. I do feel safe in venturing that they will be concretely engaged and that, even if they do not switch on all the lights in the dark tunnel of the present and so even if they do not bring us clear names for all that we encounter and direct blueprints for action, they will enrich and complicate our relating to Latin America. I’d go so far as to say that as U.S.-based scholars and teachers of Latin American literature and culture, the most political (and by that I mean ethical in just the sense described above) activity in which we can engage is the close (contemplative and theoretical) reading of the literary and cultural surface of the realities of Latin America so that we may discover (or invent) the thoughts—better yet, that we may allow for and register the thoughts—that could express our relation with the present as they “brush past us on their way somewhere else.”



NOTES

This is not a book and so acknowledgment may seem out of place. But in an article that in some ways calls for friendship, I wish to acknowledge that much of what I attempt to work out here has grown in and from conversations with friends. I'm grateful then to Hernán Vidal, Gareth Williams, Vincenzo Binetti, Sergio Villalobos, and Karla Mallette for pushing my thought beyond boundaries I hadn't realized I'd established.

1. For alternative readings of "Menos Julia" (or of Felisberto in general that still attend to the story), see Rosario-Andújar (1999, 72–95), Laddaga (1999, 31–67), Lasarte (1981, 165–91), Graziano (1997), Verani (1996, 51–75), Lockhart (1991, 82–88). Because all depart from a fundamentally antithetical position from my own, a position it is in part the task of this essay to elucidate, I have not wished to dwell upon specific disagreements about this story. These disagreements, it has seemed to me in reviewing the existing criticism and considering my own argument, result from our very different theoretical presuppositions. Suffice it to say that Felisberto's prose appears to solicit readings—particularly in a psychoanalytic vein—grounded upon a dialectical (or negative dialectical) relation of subject and object. More specifically, they assume the premise that desire entails either lack or alterity and from there generate variations on an image of Felisberto's prose as a kind of neurotic expression and over-elaboration of the theme of a desiring subject that can never find the object it is presumed to lack.
2. Deleuze also elaborates the idea of pure immanence, always inflected by the context of the discussion (1992, 169–86; 1990, 100–4; and with Félix Guattari 1987, esp. Chs. 6, 14, 15).
3. For general overviews see Graff (1987, 121–94) and Leitch (1988, 24–59). See Farred (2002) and DuBois (2003) for contributions that complicate the opposition between a formalist close reading and a politicized cultural study. In the Latin American context, see De la Campa (1999, 161) for an example of the identification of New Criticism with the depoliticization of literary studies.
4. See Conn (2002) for an account of the workings of this conservative philological tradition in relation to Latin America. For different versions of a new philology see Brown (2000), Mallette (2003), Paulson (2001a), and especially Said (2004).
5. For an overview see Franco (2002) and Hart and Young (2003). Key works marking different aspects and stages in these developments include Rama (2004; who was not U.S.-based), Beverley (1993, 1999), De la Campa (1999), and Moreiras (2001). For three relatively recent works that, although participating in the developments I describe above and drawing upon different philosophical sources than those presented here, I still take as clearing the ground for the sort of work I here advocate, see Moreiras (1999), B. Levinson (2001), and Williams (2002).

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