Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the PMLA authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981 (fax: 212 533-0680).

THE LETTERS in this Forum were submitted in response to a call for comments on the place of the intellectual in the twenty-first century. The letters are arranged in three sections: The Genealogy of the Intellectual since the French Enlightenment; The Intellectual, the Artist, and the Reader; and Today, Tomorrow: The Intellectual in the Academy and in Society. A list of the contributors follows.

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The Genealogy of the Intellectual since the French Enlightenment

What defines an intellectual? Current usage of the word implies, I think, that two conditions must coexist. The first is that the individual in question is engaged in an activity of the mind resulting in the production of a work. The principal activities of the mind—literature, science, and philosophy—operate through the intermediary of language. Filmmakers are habitually considered intellectuals as well. Painters, musicians, and actors are less often included in this category; they are classified instead as "artists" (one thus speaks of "artists and intellectuals"). The second condition is that the individual is not content simply to produce a work but is also concerned about the state of society and participates in public debate. A poet shut off in an "ivory tower" or a scientist in a laboratory is not an "intellectual." Nor are politicians, preachers, and propagandists, for they do not produce a work.

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In France the origin of this social category was authoritatively analyzed by Paul Bénichou, particularly in his book *The Consecration of the Writer* (*Le sacre de l'écrivain*, Corti, 1973). The notion arose in the eighteenth century, following the church's loss of spiritual power. Subsequently, until 1848, writers hoped to occupy the place vacated by priests. After that date, they had to face the facts: democratic society had rid itself not only of the former holders of this privilege but also of the function itself. Society no longer wanted a caste of lay priests to claim the right of constant sermonizing. In the second half of the nineteenth century, therefore, an attitude of haughty contempt predominated among "intellectuals" (the masses are not worthy of my wisdom!).

At the end of the century, with the Dreyfus affair, the word *intellectual* came into use, accompanied by a slightly different interpretation of the role it designated: a Zola no longer played the prophet but wanted rather to profit from his notoriety and from his capacity to wield words in order to denounce an injustice. In that way, he restored the function Socrates had reserved for the philosopher—to be a gadfly, a goad applied to the flank of the city, who criticizes it in the name of principles superseding current laws or reasons of state. From the beginning of the twentieth century, however, this requirement was interpreted radically as a call to question the democratic form itself (in a famous pamphlet, Julien Benda termed this the period of "the clerics' betrayal" ["la trahison des clercs"]). Thus intellectuals engaged principally in the defense of antidemocratic political and moral ideals: fascism, nationalism, communism, theocracy. This situation came to an end in France around 1975; in the last quarter of the century, intellectuals seem to have reconciled with democracy, and when they criticize it, their criticism is founded on the ideal of democracy itself.

The social category of the intellectual obviously does not play the same role in every country, even if one thinks only of western Europe and North America. The interpenetration of creative thinkers and the public sphere is quite strong in France for a number of historical reasons (the construction of universities in the center of cities, the concentration of spiritual and political activities in Paris, the traditional openness of the media—such as major newspapers and television—to intellectuals). This interpenetration seems to me weaker in the United States, notably because of the separation of the city and the university (the institution of the rural campus) but also because of traditional American anti-intellectualism.

In my view, the function of the intellectual should be maintained and will be maintained, even if the word falls into disuse and another takes its place. One should not blame writers, scientists, and philosophers who never take a position on the world they live in: they intervene in it through their works, and this intervention is after all what counts the most. Still, recognizing the continuity between their preoccupations and the life of society around them can benefit both parties concerned: it strengthens the creators, and it enriches society with the thought of those who have made the activity of the mind their profession.

The intellectual cannot be replaced by the expert: the latter knows facts; the former discusses values. It is in their interest not to ignore each other, but there is a difference in their positions: science does not produce values. Intellectuals betray their vocation if they become mere militants (even if the cause for which they fight is noble). Engaged in the work of thought, they testify by their very existence that human beings are not reducible to biological and social conditioning, that one can rise above one's immediate interests. Intellectuals will be useful to society as long as we believe that *freedom* is not a futile word.

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Translation by Martha Noel Evans

The issue of the intellectual's role in the twenty-first century is not only a timely theoretical subject but a personal concern for me as well. What it means to be an intellectual depends on where you are situated in space and time. As I was being raised and educated in communist eastern Europe in a school system that by and large was still run according to the European idea of universal culture, I believed in the capacity of knowledge to change reality. I did not realize that to be an intellectual in those days and in that part of the world meant being "bourgeois"—retrograde, dissolute, and inimical to the party. Not surprisingly, people rarely used the word *intellectual* in ordinary conversation, and they were even less inclined to describe themselves with it.

Because of what I saw in my country and also because of the failure of the May 1968 student revolt in the West, I grew suspicious of any theory claiming a direct influence on practice. Still, a residual faith in Marxist theory prevented me from succumbing to the lure of negativity or the "logics of failed revolt." If revolutionary action depended too much on the use and abuse of power, there were other forms of action that could change an oppressive system in the long run. The circulation of information and ideas and the insistence on being a "citizen of culture" despite political barriers could act as an insidious solvent. In that strategy, consumption of Western culture was an essential exercise, if a haphazard and dangerous one, which in communist Europe in the 1970s had a dis-

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sident value, even though it would not necessarily land you in jail, where the real political dissidents ended up. These forms of dissidence had little in common with the kind imagined by Julia Kristeva and the *Tel quel* group during the same period, and eastern Europeans who considered themselves intellectuals probably would have failed her test for the "new type of intellectual," "the dissident." But, of course, in the article in which she described this figure ("Un nouveau type d'intellectuel: Le dissident," *Tel quel* 74 [1977]: 3–8, trans. as "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident," trans. Seán Hand, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi [New York: Columbia UP, 1986] 292–300), Kristeva was not speaking for eastern Europeans, who could rarely buy her books or read her interviews.

By then, the idea of envisaging concrete political effects, even in the subjunctive mood, had become passé in western Europe. Once the Sartrean committed intellectual heroes and the messianic theorists-cum-revolutionaries had discovered their kinship to the totalitarian masters (and perhaps, as in the case of May 1968, their ineptitude in and distaste for the messy details of revolutionary crises), they decided to concentrate on the symbolic order. To be sure, there is nothing objectionable about this project in itself. But for them to call themselves dissident for upholding "marginal" positions and for proclaiming the power of speech and *jouissance* to subvert the symbolic system, when they were comfortably ensconced in it, was naive or presumptuous. And it still is.

It took many years, after I became an exile in America, to realize that I was both right and wrong in my assumptions. I discovered that in a postrevolutionary, postindustrial, postmodern world, western European and North American intellectuals were indeed marginalized and not merely dreaming of being so. The literary market, which once had allowed the intellectuals to exploit their ambiguous social position (both bourgeois and proletarian) and to experiment with various forms of contestation or oppositionality, had multiplied and marketed the idea of difference to the point of making it practically indifferent. And with the collapse of state ideologies and the spread of consumerism to all spheres of social life, the distinction between center and margins, which had previously defined the eccentricity of the intellectual, was no longer meaningful, except perhaps in theory. Foucault's famous rhetorical question at the end of "What Is an Author?"—"What matter who's speaking?" (we are all anonymous, "variable functions of discourse")—turned out to be right. It really doesn't matter, or so it seems.

With the notable exceptions of North American studies in gender and race, few recent theories have had any impact on the public or contributed to any change in public policy. Even so, I believe that it is mostly under the pressure of demographic and political changes that the studies I mentioned have become an acceptable academic pursuit, even a sought-after one. Scholars still live in enclaves in this country, and few intellectuals enter government. Raymond Williams's distinction between academic "specialists or professionals with limited interests" and "intellectuals, with wider interests," is eroding. And western European intellectuals, who once seemed important in their countries, now look for symbolic distinction (not to mention dividends) in American universities. As in earlier periods of spiritual exhaustion, they may be seeking new sources of energy in the New World; still, the opposition between a spiritual but effete Europe and an unreflective but vital geographic other carries unpleasant colonialist echoes. Equally questionable, in my view, are efforts to re-create false divisions by making the postcolonial other serve in place of the transgressive margin of the avant-garde, revolutionary intellectual. Surrendering to *jouissance* or playing with the death drive as a way of regaining a lost sacred experience (the Bataillean *expérience intérieure*) seems even less productive.

Despite these distressing trends and despite the rise of the postindustrial global village, dominated by media networks and technologized communication in which individual voices are often drowned, I believe that "who's speaking" still matters. It certainly does in the revival of nationalist passions in Europe. Western Europeans are beginning to realize that it is worthwhile talking back and engaging in political debates, not as a self-acknowledged or disguised master of discourse but more humbly perhaps "as a gadfly to other systems" (Martin Jay's description of the Frankfurt school). If the intellectual agenda for the twenty-first century does not look particularly new, it is nonetheless urgent.

To rethink the concept of the intellectual in its European, particularly French, descendance is equally urgent. The grand Gaullist (or Napoleonic, for that matter) image of France as the arbiter of knowledge needs to be discarded. Its purported other, the "dissident" intellectual, has an identical genealogy and likewise deserves to be disposed of. New and old intellectuals in the twenty-first century need to try to answer questions such as "What do people(s) want?" and "What is the meaning of the political today?" The answers may require a new alliance among history, psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, and political action. Just dealing with these questions and repatching the concept of agency for practical, if not theoretical, purposes could keep intellectuals busy well into the next century.

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The intellectual is dead, or at least its twentieth-century form is. The institution of the modern intellectual was invented in France at the time of the Dreyfus affair as an outgrowth of the Enlightenment quest for truth and justice. In this century intellectuals have been looked to as authorities who principally acted as moral guides or social critics. Julien Benda's classic book *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (1927) conceives of the intellectual as part of a clerical minority that operates within a moral framework and adheres to transcendent values free of the impurities of secular politics. In distaste Benda might have applied the pejorative label "moralist of reason" to Antonio Gramsci, for whom the intellectual served organized social and political interests in the here and now.

Until relatively recently the intellectual was considered a voice of emancipation and enlightenment. Going far beyond Matthew Arnold's suggestion in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) that the role of "men and culture" was to instruct society in order to repress its fractious nature, the oppositional intellectual of this century (e.g., Angela Davis, Ignazio Silone, Stephen Spender) engaged in dramatic attacks on society in order to transform it profoundly. Others, such as Jürgen Habermas, have remained wedded to the critical rationalism of Enlightenment tradition and have defined their public-activist role as a "sideline interest" in which they attempt to confront social conflicts without abandoning their commitment to private philosophical meditation. Perhaps even more radical was Jean-Paul Sartre's belief that the intellectual could give theoretical expression to the marginal power of collective experience by lending voice to the oppressed. Implicit in this argument was a century-old notion that collective political will could be shaped from the metacritical perspective of a messianic thinker who, as Edward Shils suggests, possesses an "unusual sensitivity to the sacred." Yet already in the mid-1960s Michel Foucault suggested that Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* was "the magnificent and pathetic effort of a 19th century man to think through the 20th century." It was Foucault who revolutionized the post-Enlightenment idea of the intellectual. He undercut its epistemological foundation by disallowing the possibility of shaping the political will of the other through the formulaic rhetoric of prefabricated theory that congeals conflict between master and rebel. Challenging the validity of the progressive intellectual as beacon for social change, Foucault rejected universal reason and asked that the intellectual cease to be a subject representing an oppressed consciousness (and living what he termed "the indignity of speaking for others"). Instead the intellectual was to examine the relation of theory to practice in more-localized settings where the analysis of political technologies could uncover how knowledge is transformed into power.

Now, as the new millennium approaches, a period of historical deceleration seems to have begun. The post-Enlightenment vision of progress and human liberation associated with various left-wing causes has eroded significantly. The speculative dreams of Western intellectuals, motivated by religious fervor for the great ideologies or by the heuristic magic of metanarratives, have sunk into an epistemological void. Not only has the euphoria of revolutionary liberation been demystified with the marketing of the concepts of the "new world order" and the "end of history," but its disappearance has led to a historical revisionism that has stymied authentic cultural debate.

Even more discouraging is what Russell Jacoby describes in *The Last Intellectuals* as the disappearance of public intellectuals in the United States, those writers and thinkers like Irving Howe who believed in civic virtue and exercised it by addressing an informed urban populace. Perhaps as the result of the democratization of the American university in the last half century, public intellectuals retreated into the academic world, where some, becoming enamored of disciplinary specialization, took fewer and fewer risks and were reduced to technocratic professionals. The theoretical revolution of the 1970s offered the hope that institutional presuppositions would be exploded and that academic intellectuals would engage in epistemological activism. In recent years, however, the increased focus of the academy on discrete questions of interpretation has converted what was potentially radical into a virtual plague of chic pseudotheories that offer repetition of the same with little or no difference and that are merchandised and sold according to the demands of a market-driven university economy.

There may indeed be additional battles to be won, but they must transcend what Jean Baudrillard has termed the "epidemic of consensus." In this fin de siècle the media have transformed public life into entertainment, sterilizing the political as they colonized the world that once belonged to intellectuals. Karl Mannheim's 1929 call for a "socially unattached intelligentsia" that can function independent of institutionalized concerns is relevant now. In the next century the intellectual must be willing to take more risks by choosing exile from confining institutional, theoretical, and discursive formations. I do not mean a return to the Romantic idea of the intellectual as an isolated clairvoyant, unreconcilable to society. On the contrary, intellectuals can reassert their ties to the community by disintoxicating themselves from the poisonous illusion of communication projected onto the mass-medium screen. Further, the intellectual can play a

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vital disillusioning role by enabling the demystification of epistemic authority and by critically examining new forms of knowledge that allow for unconventional experimentation in a world constantly reinvented.

In the political arena the intellectual of the next century must adopt an ironic discourse that displaces the normative narratives of political judgment and the tyranny of moral legislation. But the intellectual must also transcend the post-Foucauldian belief that one can no longer choose a strategy of opposition. Without any doubt opposition cannot be realized in an anachronistic discourse that claims the universality of the just and the right. History must once again have its place in the intellectual's project, but not as the defining and absolute way of being in the world. If the institution of the intellectual is to survive, it can only do so by reestablishing its secular base and by remaining skeptical of political fundamentalism.

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Since the time Kant forcefully established the claim of the intellect with his critical idealism, reason has looked—in both serious philosophical work and popular usage—like something of an antonym to sensation, experience, and action. From Marx's attacks on the abstraction of the young Hegelians to the attitudes of mid-twentieth-century American society, as described by Richard Hofstadter, anti-intellectualism has seemed to be supported by good reasons. Apparently preferring theory over practice and committed to rationalizing rather than emotional response, intellectuals have seemed not just skeptics but obstructionists as well. Urged to "just do it," intellectuals want to know just what is to be done.

It would be a mistake to defend the intellectual too quickly against the charge of being simply a scold, a glorified hall monitor. For the intellectual does not possess clearly superior knowledge about issues that people would prefer not to be challenged on. Nor does the intellectual's unpopularity come from saying things that are uncomfortably true. Rather, intellectuals have a special role in modern society and in the information age because they do *not* have a preestablished body of knowledge, set of facts, or specific constituency (in the way that a pundit like Rush Limbaugh speaks for a sector of public opinion).

That is, the intellectual has historically been imperfectly professionalized. The intellectual offers a special approach to a problem or a series of problems but cannot claim to be a perfect specialist—someone who can assume responsibility for a particular activity, acting on behalf of others so that they cease to need to act themselves. Unlike the tailor, the carpenter, and the lawyer, who sew, build, and sue for their clients, intellectuals claim only to say something, and thus they may affect, for example, the political conduct, views on the economy, or literary understanding of others but will never vote, hold opinions, or read for them.

The situation of intellectuals as imperfect representatives has marked the university and the social structures that it contributes to. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant analyzes the various claims of the faculties in the university, beginning with the professions—law, medicine, and theology—to which individuals cede their authority out of a plausible commitment to their legal rights, physical health, and spiritual well-being. Then, as now, those professions were underwritten by their considerable utility, which gave them the practical mandate to continue without rethinking their discourse or questioning their basic presuppositions. They were professions of the book, by virtue of their role in assimilating particular cases to modes of preexistent practices, statutes, and maxims; but, Kant argued, these professions should not be able to choose their books and claim that their professional expertise could incorporate everything. The basic task of restraining the professions that were powerful on account of their immediate usefulness, he thought, had to fall to the philosophy faculty (the precursor of present-day departments in the humanities and social sciences). The philosophy faculty would be able, for instance, to argue specifically against the theology faculty's requiring religious conversion as part of its program.

Retracing Kant's position to provide a historical model of the rise of critical studies in the humanities, Ian Hunter argues against the notion that humanists should feel authorized to challenge others' professions ("The Regimen of Reason," Johns Hopkins Univ., spring 1995). He faults the humanities today for continuing to act as if its professional approval mattered and ought to matter to those professions. In his view, the witty remarks that literature professors make about what they take to be the biases and follies of statistical sociologists, census takers, and scientists are licensed by a genealogical accident. Hunter proposes a philological perspective that, marking the difference between the university in the eighteenth century and now, will chasten the intellectual's sense of self-importance as censor.

My position involves both greater modesty and greater ambition for intellectuals and the intellectual professions. The modesty appears in the view that there is no methodological position that can help intellectuals to tell what terrain they ought to cede to other fields. The ambition lies in the view that literary criticism and other intellectual

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professions are, at least potentially, committed to a project that is political in the most basic sense—scrutinizing texts in such a way as to enable one to recognize views that one doesn't hold. This is, I take it, the importance of the formalist legacy in literary criticism. Texts like Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* ask readers to make sense of tales whose anonymous and collective authorship requires that analysts not begin by visualizing an author with an agenda; texts like Freud's case studies argue that there is significant sense even to the apparent nonsense of Dr. Schreiber and the Wolf Man.

The most important contribution that the intellectual has to make to the society of the new millennium is, it seems to me, to demonstrate that texts needn't all be recruited for consensus, that they can instead enable society to acknowledge the existence of views that it does not—and may never—endorse.

FRANCES FERGUSON
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The precursors of today's intellectuals were the *philosophes* who propagated the Enlightenment, using lodges, salons, cafés, journals, theaters, and academies to express ideas on progress, the primacy of reason, and the rights of the individual. According to Enlightenment belief, energetic minds could organize, categorize, and ultimately assimilate knowledge in its totality, as the seventeen volumes of the *Encyclopédie* (1751–66) were designed to show. Although founded a century earlier, the Académie Française sought to prescribe correct French well into the Enlightenment. Of course, modern linguists have destroyed the ideal of fixed proper usage (ironically, the Académie's only significant progeny, the Real Academia de la Lengua Española [founded in 1713], faced an enormous lexicographical invasion from the Americas), and a knowledge explosion has made conventional encyclopedias acutely provisional. Television and cyberspace have provided new outlets for expression, and CD-ROMs contain previously unimaginable fonts of information.

The term *philosophe* designated writers, thinkers, and scientists; in 1818 Coleridge called learned persons the clerisy; and early-twentieth-century Russia created the word *intelligencija*. Is there an analytic definition of what these terms designate in common? For Edward Shils (*"The Intellectuals and the Powers" and Other Essays* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972]) and Daniel Bell ("Intellectuals," *The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. Alan Bullock and Oliver Stallybrass [New York: Harper, 1977] 314–15), an intellectual is someone who is intensely attached to cognitive, moral, and aesthetic symbols outside immediate experience. Foucault provides a useful distinction between the "specific" intellectual, or scholar, and the "universal" intellectual, who derives from the jurist or notable and finds fullest manifestation in the writer ("Questions of Geography," *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Graham [New York: Pantheon, 1980] 128). It recognizes the great flowering of experts produced by universities. Foucault is more charitable than Ortega, who would have dubbed the respected and valued expert on Foucault or Virginia Woolf—as distinct from Foucault and Woolf themselves—a *sabio-ignorante* ("learned ignoramus").

At the close of the twentieth century, intellectuals do not appear to be a dying breed. On the contrary, their spectacular increase in numbers makes one long for an Ortega to analyze this new revolt of the masses. While public rendezvous in salons, Masonic lodges, and cafés are gone, journals have multiplied a hundredfold, although some have less-than-dutiful gatekeepers; academies have given way to universities; and guilds are now professional associations with a Byzantine range of interests. Today intellectuals are liable to begin as teachers in classrooms (there are no journalist or jurist intellectuals as in the time of Lippmann or Holmes) and to progress to publication of their writing, provided that—if the publisher is a university press—their discourse reflects the specialized interests of certain other intellectuals. At the same time, for a few academics, trade books, television talk shows, and cyberspace lurk in the wings to offer an audience even Bertrand Russell never imagined. One result is an intensification of the star system. T. S. Eliot, Ortega, and Croce were stars in their time (in his prime Eliot drew 13,700 spectators to a football stadium in Minneapolis to listen to a lecture on criticism, and Ortega talked to packed if often uncomprehending audiences in Madrid). But today's stars enjoy more fame and popularity than before and reach a wider audience.

Tension among intellectual groups and the dangers of dogma are nothing new. What is novel today is technology and the money it provides to intellectual stars as they flash across the horizon for three to five years before their celebrity wears off and they go from the pages of the *New York Times Magazine* back to the learned journal, to be sighted thereafter only when they write a letter to the editor.

I cannot imagine a society in which groups of people did not distinguish themselves by an intense attachment to cognitive, moral, and aesthetic symbols outside immediate experience. And I cannot imagine a society that did not recognize intellectual acuity or merit, however defined. It is ironic that the Enlightenment, which led to Ortega's *sabio-ignorante*, also generated the zeal to apply reason for the betterment of society and enhanced

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the value placed on learning and on intellectual curiosity. These are gifts difficult to despise.

Ortega wrote, "Sorprenderse, extrañarse, es comenzar a entender. Es el deporte y el lujo específico del intelectual" 'To be surprised, filled with wonder, is the beginning of understanding. It is a sport and a luxury specific to the intellectual' (*La rebelión de las masas*, 1929 [Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1959] 51; my trans.). In this remark, sport conveys the playfulness and elasticity of mind valued in intellectual activity, while luxury suggests that such activity provides society with wealth that comes from no other source.

HOWARD YOUNG
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Since beginning my career as an intellectual in the American academy, I have had a strange feeling of discomfort and helplessness. A question haunts me, and I cannot answer it no matter how hard I try: Can I justify what I am and do as an intellectual? When I discuss this question with my colleagues, they typically respond with reassuring comments about our endeavors, but once I leave the academic realm, my undertaking is derided, pitied, and scorned. The source of my uneasiness lies in this gap between the intellectual's position and public opinion.

What people outside academia question and criticize is the intellectual's ideal of detachment, objectivity, disinterestedness, and autonomy, which intellectuals such as the French philosopher Julien Benda have defended. This ideal treats intellectuals as unidimensional beings, which they cannot be. As Pierre Bourdieu writes in "Fourth Lecture. Universal Corporatism: The Role of Intellectuals in the Modern World" (*Poetics Today* 12 [1991]), "The intellectual is a *bidimensional* being. . . . [O]n the one hand, he must belong to an autonomous intellectual world (a field), that is, independent from religious, political, and economic powers (and so on), and must respect its specific laws; on the other hand, *he must invest the competence and authority he has acquired in the intellectual field in a political action, which is in any case carried out outside the intellectual field proper*" (656; second italics mine). Since the Enlightenment, the balance between these two dimensions has never been stable: autonomy weighs at times more than engagement and vice versa.

As the end of the twentieth century approaches, American intellectuals appear to have entered a period of nonengagement, cherishing their autonomy over engagement and retreating into the ivory tower. Indeed, the attitude of today's intellectuals is a far cry from the radical stance that intellectuals adopted in the 1960s. Does this mean there is no consensual issue worth standing up for? Or is the oft-talked-about crisis in the humanities blunting intellectuals' ability to discern what is of consequence, dulling their desire to be engaged? Evidently, there is a strong tendency among intellectuals to be overly concerned with their own prerogatives and interests. To use a Baudrillardian image, intellectuals these days seem like fish that are happy swimming around their aquariums and looking out at the chaos plaguing the world.

This period of nonengagement is reinforced by two additional factors. First, as William Pfaff points out in "The Lay Intellectual (Apologia pro Sua)" (*Salmagundi* 70–71 [1986]), American intellectuals flourish most in a university setting, and they thereby become isolated from society. When was the last time vast numbers of American intellectuals formed one body to oppose a state or federal bill, as has just happened in France with the Debré law to increase controls on immigration? Instead, intellectuals in the 1990s are content to remain within their university cliques, disseminating their ideas in a void they fail to notice because it engulfs them. The second contributing factor is the increasing popularity of new technologies such as the Internet, which, while fostering the exchange of ideas, draw intellectuals further inside, intensifying their separation from the world beyond the campus servers.

Those who try to define the place of the intellectual in the twenty-first century would do well to look to the past, in particular to the Enlightenment, and follow Voltaire, who in his article "L'homme de lettres" (*Dictionnaire philosophique*) contrasted engagement with "the scholastic obscurantism of decadent universities and academies" (Bourdieu 656–57). The reference to obscurantism the "deprecation of or positive opposition to enlightenment or the spread of knowledge" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, 1986 ed.)—rings true today. Is it not obscurantist to convey ideas obscurely, to judge the public unfit for knowledge? Isn't overspecialization cutting academics off from the public? Can a mind be wasted on matters so futile that only a negligible minority cares about them? Shouldn't intellectuals use their minds to reach out to the public and to espouse matters that directly concern their communities and their states? In Washington State, for example, the Commission for the Humanities sends intellectuals on tour to build bridges between people and ideas. This type of initiative is unfortunately too uncommon. The future of intellectuals in the twenty-first century depends on their ability and willingness to be "bidimensional," equally devoted to engagement and autonomy, the academy and the public.

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I can't say that the notion of the "intellectual" appears well founded to me, given the way it has been used in ideology, politics, and the media over the last century. This use seems confused and thus rather harmful. I don't think that any human activity is by its nature more intellectual than another. As everybody knows, human beings are intelligent because they have hands. I don't know any "manual" occupation that doesn't require some participation of the mind—or, if this word seems too idealist, of the brain. And I'm not sure that those who use their hands the least are necessarily those who use the intellect the best. When Marcel Proust was asked what "manual occupation" he would have liked to practice, he would answer in all seriousness, "Writer," a response that puts things in place rather well. If, as is often the case, one takes the individuals or groups who work in the academy (in the broad sense, "from nursery school to the Collège de France," as we say in France) as a synonym for "intellectuals" or as "intellectuals" par excellence, I believe that intellectuals' social "role" is a function of their professional obligations as teachers and "scientific researchers," since these two responsibilities are generally commingled in what they do. In both cases, it seems to me that their fundamental duty is steadfastness in what they hold, rightly or wrongly, to be the sincere search for truth. All other duties derive from that one, and I don't see any evidence that it has changed since the Enlightenment—or even since the beginning of civilization, whatever changes the *conditions* of its practice have undergone in the course of history. But, once again, I don't think that any profession or social group retains a preeminent role in this regard; I don't see any responsibility linked to the exercise of thought that is not shared by the whole of "thinking" humanity—that is, humanity in general.

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Translation by Martha Noel Evans

Right hand from the acrolith of Constantine, Musei Capitolini, Rome. Courtesy of the Archivio Fotografico dei Musei Capitolini. Photo: Maria Teresa Natale.

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