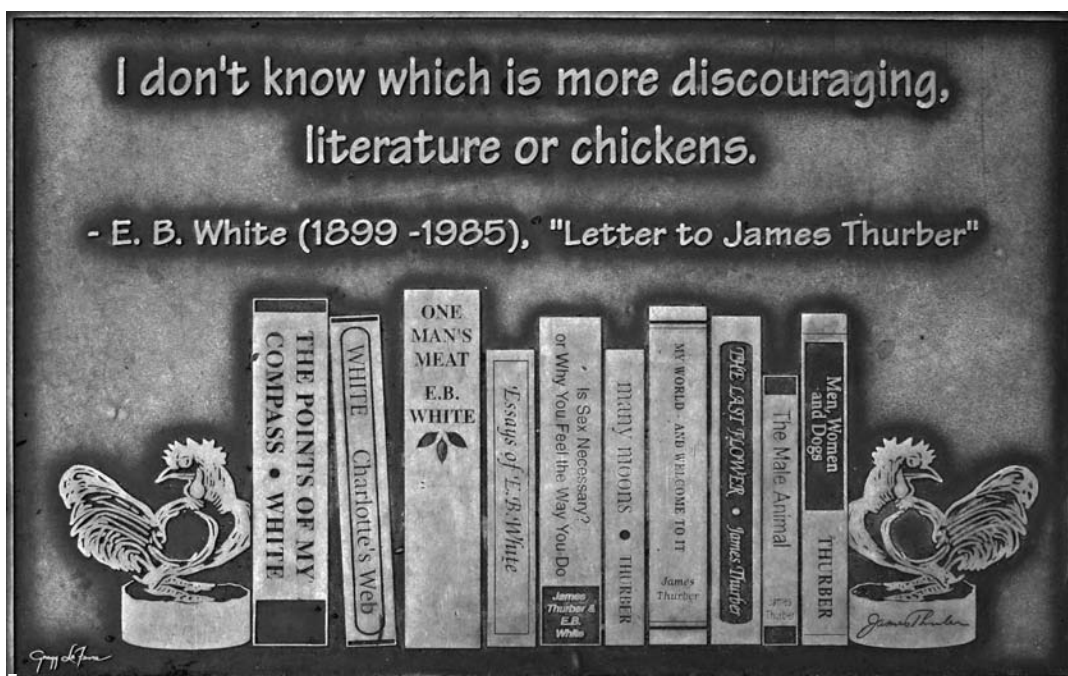


## Editor's Column: The Library Walk

**E**VERY FEW MONTHS I DECIDE TO RAISE CHICKENS IN MY BACKYARD. I covet the eggs, the feathery bodies, and the honor of joining the Loop de Coop, Ann Arbor's yearly chicken-coop tour. But last year, reading E. B. White's witty remark on the Library Walk in New York, I relinquished coop dreams forever:



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This may be the most eccentric citation on the Library Walk, a collection of plaques adorning both sidewalks along Forty-First Street between Park Avenue and the New York Public Library. Assembled

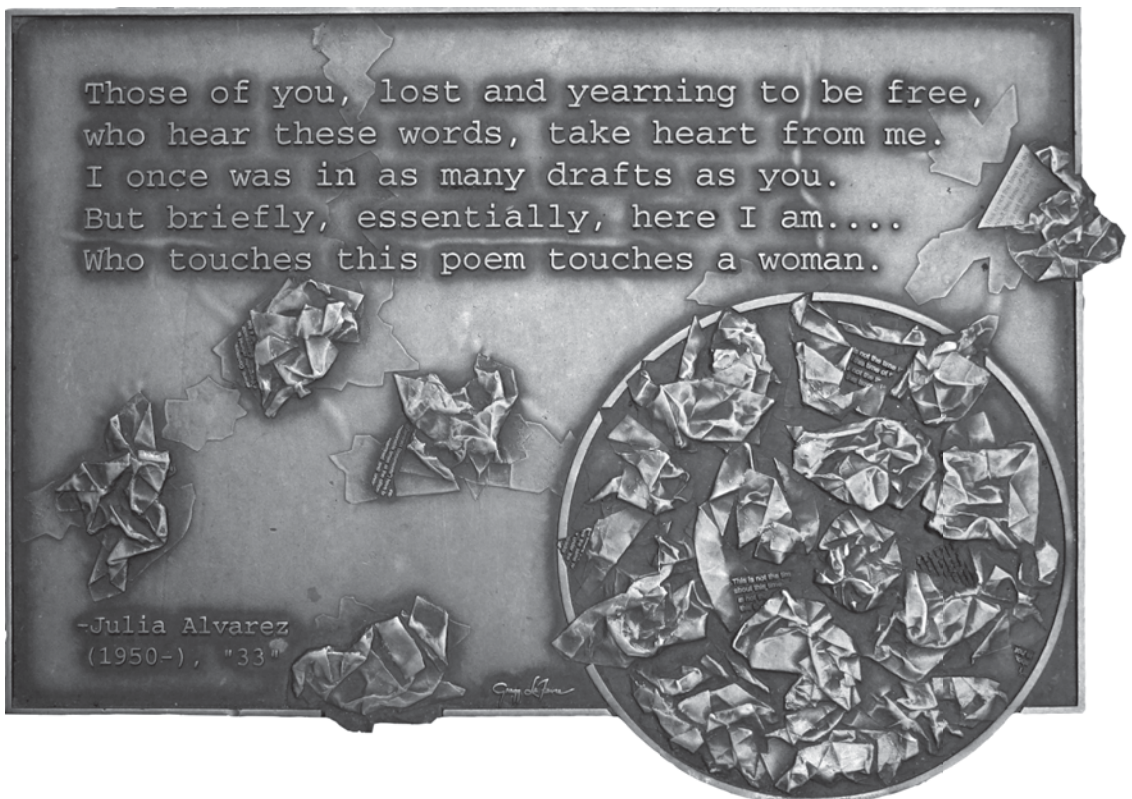
by the Grand Central Partnership (in collaboration with the New York Public Library and *New Yorker* magazine) and cast in bronze relief by Gregg LeFevre in 2004, these weird little packets of literacy were designed to rehabilitate a “shadowy street” and make it a glorious library entrance. Seven years later, Forty-First Street remains shrouded in garbage and construction, and so these metal memorials are all the more strange—found objects ignored and ebullient, yet anchoring an urban jungle. The juxtapositions can be surreal. Muriel Rukeyser poses at the freight entrance to 60 East Forty-Second Street—shunted to the side door forever. Langston Hughes graces the door to the Library Hotel (with beds starting at \$395 a night plus tax). Edged with bronze coins, Henry David Thoreau’s insistence that “[b]ooks are the treasured wealth of the world” is a stepping stone to Bank of America.

The last time I visited, a giant waste-metal demolition truck grumbled down the street, menacing buildings, bronze plaques, and passersby. Fed by a battalion of yellow

four-wheel carts the size of photocopiers and loaded with metal salvage, the demolition truck flaunted its own quotation:

RiteWay  
Interior-Exterior  
DEMOLITION SPECIALISTS  
Mini to 40 cu yard Containers  
“Through our Service We continue to grow”  
Your Way . . . Our Way  
Dave’s Way . . . The Rite Way

Arnoldian touchstones may be outmoded in literary criticism, but in the city, logos and slogans try to capitalize on consumers’ desire for the “Rite Way.” The Library Walk also tries to resurrect an older mode of reading in which we seize upon literature’s slogans to discover “the best that has been thought and known.” But the visual component of LeFevre’s reliefs often wrangles with their highfalutin literary signage. In Julia Alvarez’s trash-strewn plaque, crumpled paper falls out of the frame and joins the trash on the street:



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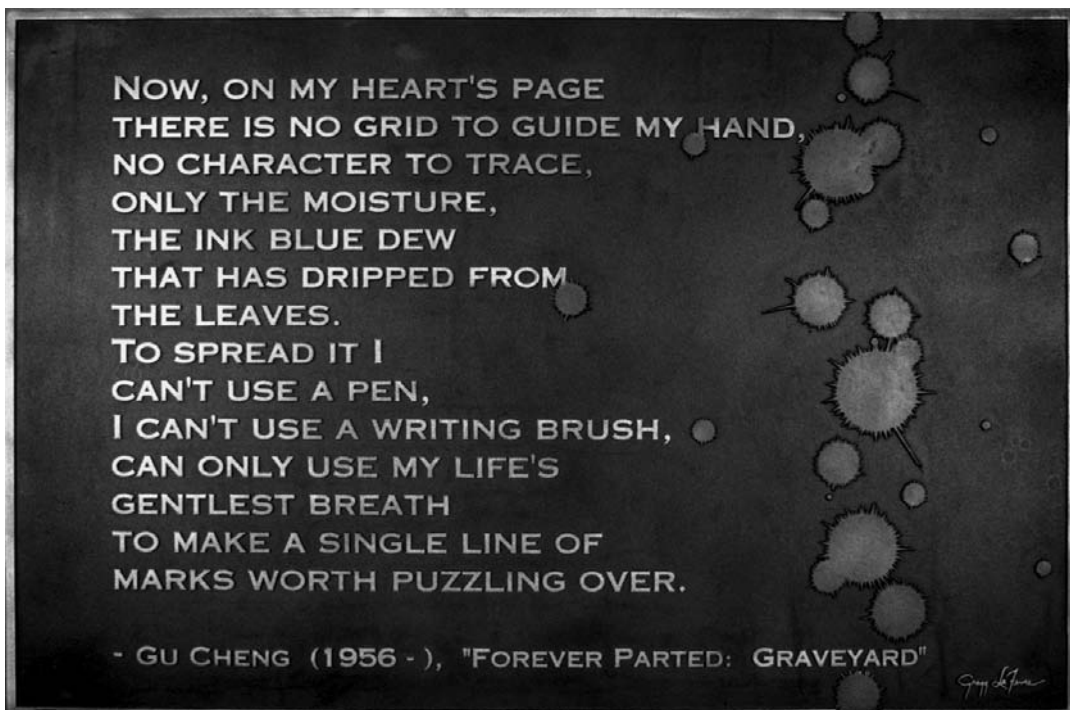
-Julia Alvarez  
(1950-), "33"

Reading this plaque, we are caught in an aporia, a knot of words. “Who touches this poem touches a woman.” Really? Instead, we encounter metal words and the yawn of an *O*-shaped trash receptacle. The encounter with a touchstone hardens and vanishes; only the wit remains.

Adding to this urban cacophony, we’ve invited sixteen scholars to comment on the

Library Walk as a literary-corporate adventure. The tour starts across the avenue from the public library and continues on the south side of Forty-First Street, inviting you to saunter with us toward Grand Central Terminal.

*Patricia Yaeger*



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IT IS DIFFICULT TO READ THE POETRY OF GU Cheng (顧城 [1956–93]) and not think of death. Gu, who rose to literary prominence in China in the 1980s, famously murdered his wife and killed himself while living in New Zealand. In writing, Gu manifests a similarly unsettling quality of mind. His poems, which attempt to measure the traumas of China’s mid-century history, often represent miniature tragedies, each creating intense moments of loss and mourning. In death Gu has only inspired increased attention to what Li

Xia dubs the “poetics of death” that animate his work.

Visitors to New York City’s Library Walk encounter this recurring trauma when they read Gu’s contribution, an early stanza from “Forever Parted: Graveyard.” This poem, set against the backdrop of a cemetery, offers an extended meditation on death and the fleeting nature of human connection. Violence—of the soul and body—seeps through each line of the text.

Yet one is struck by the way the poem is transmitted to American audiences and

transformed into English. Although forlorn in tone, the excerpt presented here is curiously regenerative. Brushes and pens may fail, but ultimately the speaker's breath becomes his conduit. History and death vanish as the poet breathes words into life. This bit of text contrasts starkly with the rest of the poem.

The English-language translators have elided a key line from the original Chinese version of the poem: 它反潮了 'It [the heart's page] has become saturated.' Here an important paradox in the text is removed. While in the English the translators present a seamless image of a "heart's page" that contains a bit of "ink blue dew" on its surface, in the original there exists an unsettling contradiction: the heart's page is soaked through with blue ink that originates within itself, within the margins of the page. The paradox is that the heart's page possesses no writing or script yet is invaded by ink that emanates from itself. Gu sought to convey this tension through this image of the page's seeming violence against itself. However, in English this figure completely vanishes from view.

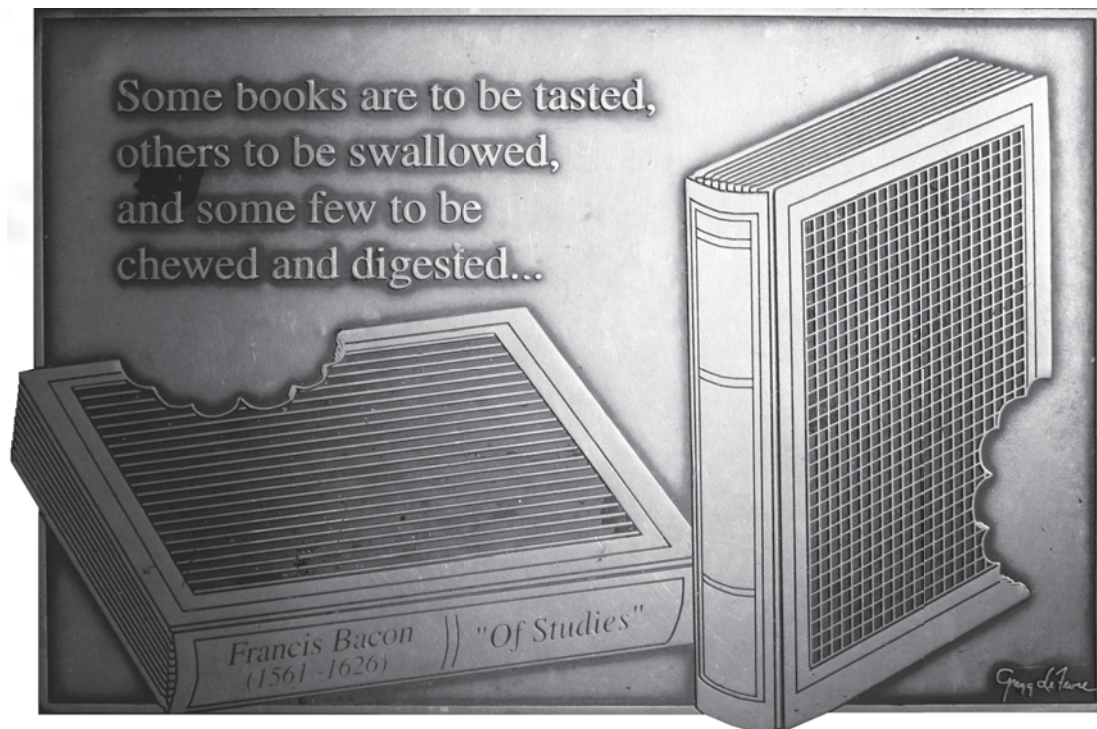
Finally, there is the matter of the poem's anglophone physical embodiment. The Library Walk plaque incorrectly lists Gu as living by omitting his date of death. Ironically, while sinophone readers continue to reckon with Gu's lasting mortuary poetics, Anglophones in New York are introduced to him as a writer of cautious hope who breathes in text and life.

There is a rich paradox in the text presented here, but it belongs to the poem's transmitted form rather than its content. The curators of the Library Walk have chosen a poem on death to resurrect—to bring back from the dead—a poet best known for trauma and suicide. Yet it is a fitting paradox for Gu, who fled China in 1987 to live in Germany and New Zealand as an exile until his death. He disseminated his poems across the Pacific, and like seeds they regenerate their departed creator in ways unforeseen, in languages different, and in forms anew.

*Richard Jean So*  
University of Chicago



Pam Roller.



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THE CONVENTIONAL IMAGE ON THE PLAQUE devoted to Francis Bacon on the Library Walk is reminiscent of the Old English riddle that asks what chews many words but never grows wiser for anything it swallows. Though it is unlikely that Bacon knew the Exeter Book, which contains this riddle about a bookworm, the excerpt from his essay “Of Studies” is a reminder that to him, as to earlier humanists, the judicious consumption of printed matter constituted a topic of reflection. A drafter of grand plans for the rehabilitation of all knowledge and a proto-empiricist and proto-modern whose writings inspired the founding of Britain’s Royal Society, Bacon shaped his intellectual projects through and against the literate culture of the university and the humanist bureaucracy of the Tudor-Stuart state; he could not have functioned as politician and courtier without the repertory of knowledge judicious reading might furnish.

This knowledge was understood to be practical, for use rather than an end in itself. “Of Studies,” which appears in all three printings of *The Essays*, expands in scope

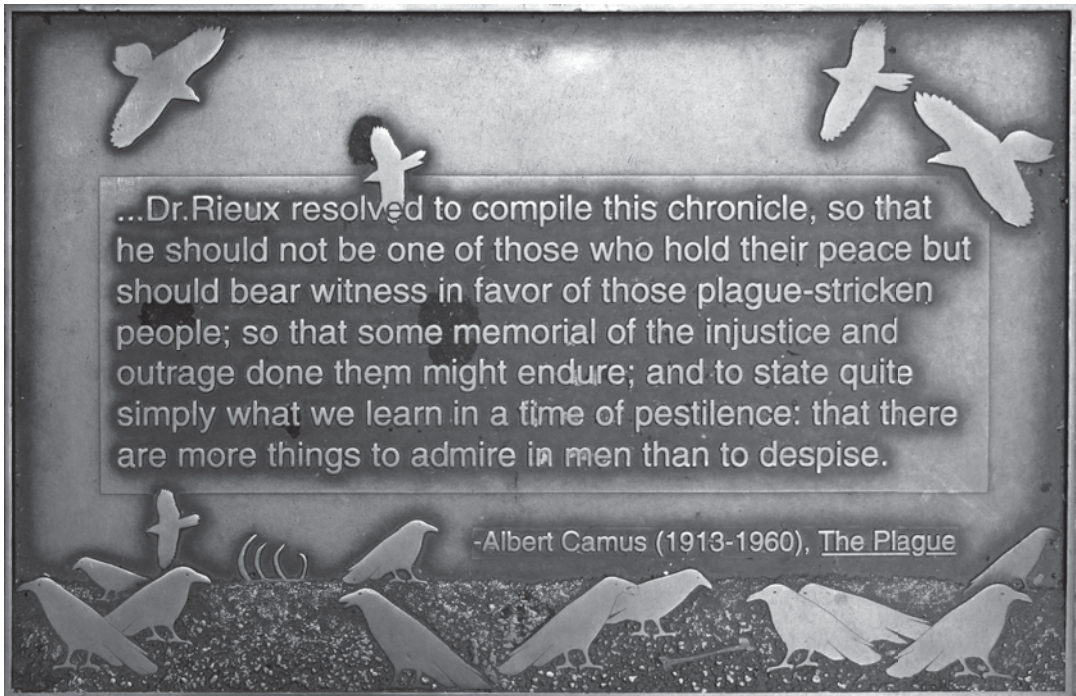
with each enlarged edition, tending more and more toward a dialectical understanding of how reading informs and is tested by experience. In a letter to Fulke Greville, Bacon advises the poet on the method a tutor might employ for “gathering”—summarizing—books on Greville’s behalf. (The 1625 version of “Of Studies” also discusses the possibility of employing a deputy to predigest reading matter, although it compares books thus “distilled” to water treated similarly, which is flat to the taste.) Bacon argues that the tutor should sift through a book to organize its information under “heads” or “titles,” not offer an epitome. It is, he wrote, more useful to peruse a life of Alexander for commonplaces on such topics as strategy in war or revolutions of state than to offer a potted biographical sketch: information collected under heads possesses “a kind of observation, without the which neither long life breeds experience, nor great reading great knowledge.”

Both in organizational form and in the emphasis on observation, Bacon’s technique for dealing with printed matter resembles

his efforts to systematize the investigation of natural phenomena. The multiplicity of topical headings under which he proposes to divide the fruits of experiment—experience—in *Instauratio magna* is a way to collect from the book of nature, the better to digest one's findings. But studies can also be directly medicinal, a homeopathic corrective to deformations of character. Hence his observation in "Of Studies" that "every defect of the mind may have a special receipt" for reading,

a prescription by which it may be cured (as with mathematics for a "wandering" wit). Here consuming books is afforded corporeal agency, a digesting that has the same sort of material effect as, if more lofty aims than, the mindless decoction of the ordinary library pest to which the New York Public Library has linked Bacon's words.

*Denise Albanese*  
George Mason University



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**WHY DO I RETURN PERPETUALLY TO ALBERT Camus?** His novels anchor my courses on twentieth-century France, and he comes to mind unbidden when I write about Claude Simon, Patrick Modiano, Bertrand Tavernier, Marguerite Duras, or Irène Némirovsky. What is it that draws me, as if to an old friend, to his 1954 recording of *The Stranger*, read in his own laconic voice?

The grain of Camus's voice on my iPod embodies his voice in the broader sense: Camus speaks personally through everything he writes. My favorite of his characters is Sisyphus, who, against the absurdity of mortal existence, reminds us that optimism is a choice. You can feel his physical effort as he pushes his eternal boulder uphill, bearing silent witness to the difficulty of living. In *The*

*Plague*, Dr. Rieux assumes another Sisyphean task, about which “he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done.” No heroics, then, but simply the modest human measure of the task. Here resides Camus’s continuing modernity.

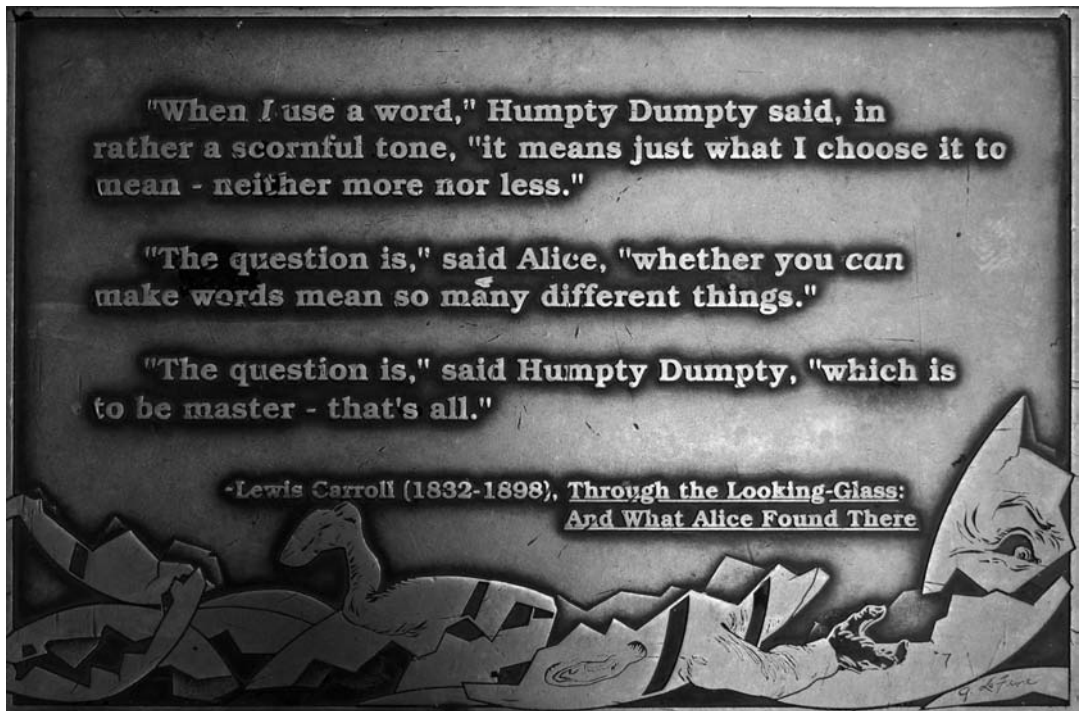
The artist, too, is Sisyphus. Accepting the 1957 Nobel Prize, Camus argued that truth had to be conquered over and over again. Algerian and French, born in poverty and later admitted to the Parisian intellectual elite, actor, playwright, novelist, essayist, journalist, and editor in the Resistance and afterward, he shaped many of the intellectual and political movements of his time. Camus made the effort of being optimistic about literature.

Camus was a witness—and a voice—for the twentieth century much as Victor Hugo was for the nineteenth. Hugo too was fully engaged (“embarked” is Camus’s more unassuming term) in the currents of his age. In *Notre Dame de Paris*, Hugo maintained that writing was more durable than stone, the book more monumental than the cathedral.

Camus didn’t much care for monuments. He wanted to be buried in Lourmarin,

Provence. He would not have felt at home in the Pantheon. In Camus’s unfinished novel, *The First Man*, the autobiographical protagonist, Jacques Cormery, recounts his pilgrimage to the tomb of his father, fallen in a foreign country (France, 1914) when Jacques was an infant. Staring at the name and dates on the simple tombstone, Cormery realizes with visceral shock that the man who lies there is younger than himself. The son is older than the father, and the world makes no sense. Camus’s own accidental death, in 1960, was senseless too, and his tombstone similarly bears just his name and dates of birth and death. In 1946 Camus visited New York City on a university speaking tour. It seems fitting that the Library Walk plaque honors not the writer but the creation. Dr. Rieux’s “chronicle” serves as a monument to optimism and the power of writing. Hugo compared the cathedral to an earth-bound mountain, while the printed word was “indestructible” and “volatile,” like “a flock of birds, scattering to the four winds and filling all air and space.” I like to think the image on Camus’s plaque depicts those birds.

Lynn Higgins  
Dartmouth College



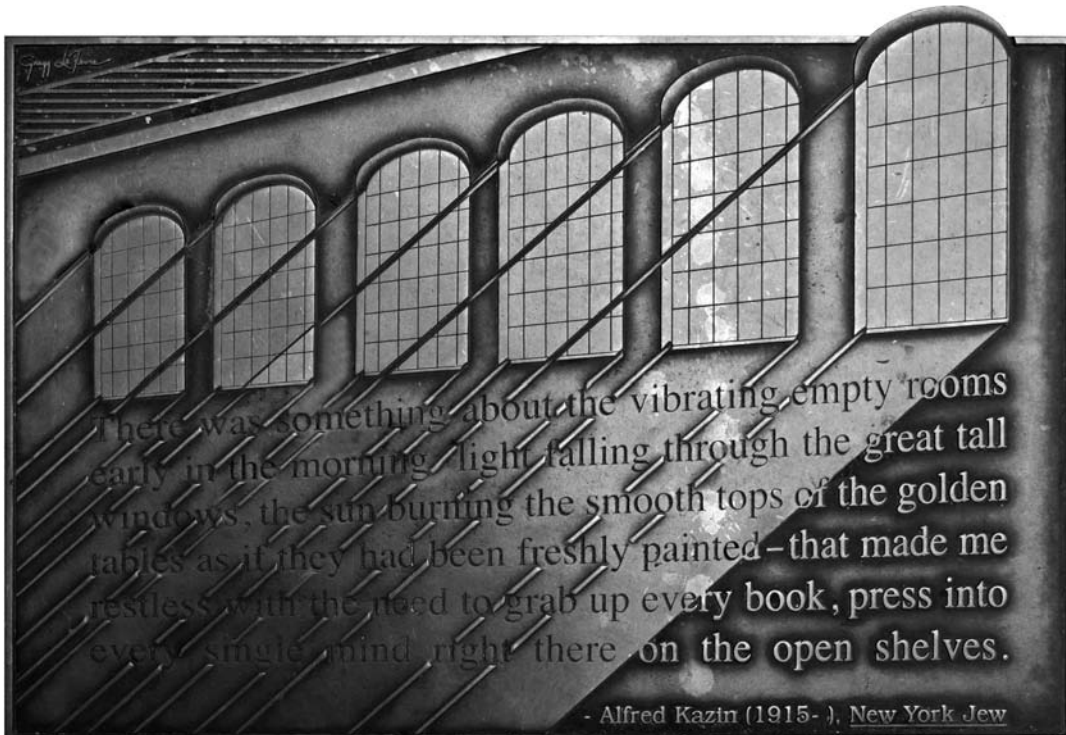
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ENDURINGLY FRAGILE, LEGENDARILY SHATTERED, always back together again with belt or bowtie never askew, and perfectly balanced on an often improbably narrow wall, Humpty Dumpty is a long-standing riddle and portable character who resides, among other places, on West Forty-First Street in Manhattan, splatted on the sidewalk among other literary characters immobilized in bronze. This brief quotation from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) suggests that Humpty Dumpty is a rogue explicator, a radical reader, a superstrict social constructionist, a no-nonsense nominalist: words mean what he says they mean. On further reflection, we find that this is probably true and that all the bronze words around us on this unusually empty Midtown street might mean anything, especially given their excerpted condition. But they tend not to mean just anything: we read them under some kind of critical rubric. We probably do not decide that the name "Alice" means "four o'clock in the afternoon" or that "Humpty Dumpty" is a chicken and not an egg—possibly out of sheer laziness.

Humpty Dumpty reminds us, if we read further in the chapter whence this snippet is taken, that meaning is a game (Carroll also thought that logic was a game) and that we can either cede authority to the authorities or decide to be master and make sense of our texts according to new rules of meaning, rules that we decide on and that we explain and explore. Nonsense texts remind us that meaning is conventional; they delight us because they suggest how much meaning has yet to be made. As Humpty Dumpty says, "I can explain all the poems that were invented—and a good many that haven't been invented just yet." As teachers of literature and culture, of reading and representation, we might want to say that we can try to make sense of all the poems, plaques, movies, novels, television series, hairdos, plays, refrigerator magnets, epitaphs, and billboards that have been invented and then try to make sense of them again—that is, dare to give up the mastery of criticism in all its forms of making sense.

Elaine Freedgood  
New York University





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MOST OF US REMEMBER THE FIRST DAY OR launch of something notable. Few of us remember the second day as a beginning, but that is precisely my memory of being a fellow at the New York Public Library's Center for Scholars and Writers. The year was 2001, the month September. The second day was the 11th.

It was a beginning, though not the imagined beginning. It was a launch, but of a different kind of remarkable year at the New York Public Library. Alfred Kazin's plaque, celebrating "the vibrating empty rooms early in the morning—light falling through the great tall windows, the sun burning the smooth tops of the golden tables," captures the excitement and the anticipation of beginning a day in the New York Public Library—the sense of restless eagerness and of open possibilities lying just within reach in the books lining the open shelves that Kazin experienced. Those extraordinary windows, channeling light in, also allow a view out onto the city, to Fifth Avenue, with its flow of traffic downtown, and to Patience and Fortitude,

with their lion heads and hearts impervious to danger.

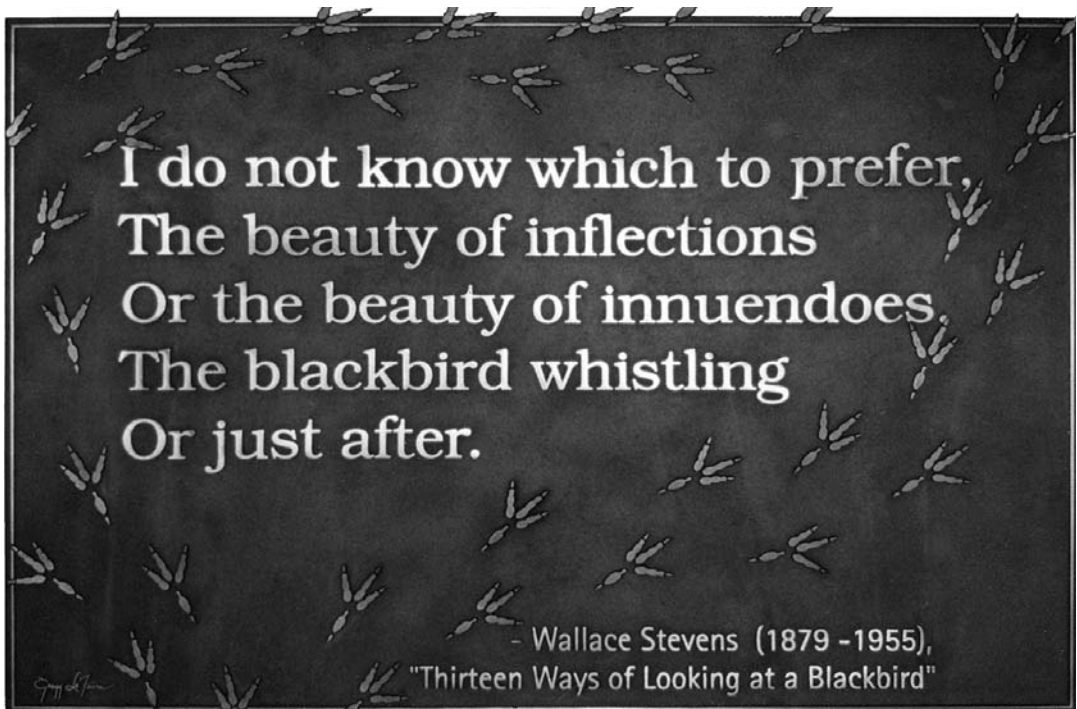
On 9/11, the second day of my tenure at the center and the day designated for morning introductions to librarians and archivists, to special collections and closed stacks, the light streaming into the Humanities and Social Sciences Library was magnificent. Clear, brilliant, and just possibly as vividly luminescent as any Kazin ever saw, that light seemed to announce the best of all possible worlds for a writer and researcher.

Indeed, in the most unimaginable way it was. While still golden with light, the massive structure was suddenly shadowed by fear. Its thickness suggested security; its quiet seemed protection; its windows offered answers. With caravans of portable morgue trucks rumbling down Fifth Avenue by the hundreds and, against that flow, streams of walkers tumbling uptown by the thousands, the view out the windows was horrific, but inside the light refracted through the panes highlighted a web of tensile strengths.

The connections forged out of an unexpected necessity made the large central room in the Center for Scholars and Writers as comforting and secure as a researcher's carrel. The books and minds Kazin observed waiting on the shelves for exploration also stood as stalwarts, hope against collapse and destruction. Those books and the women and men who wrote them spoke comfort and openness. Their staunch and tight ranks sheltered us and lifted us into other times, other places, of tragedy and fear that melded into halcyon days of golden light, survival, and strength in the words of authors and spines of books. What a gift! What

a beginning anew! That second-day launch of an intellectual and scholarly journey gave new meanings to light, space, and time; that day created out of panic and sudden destruction forged new intellectual and emotional bonds, all placed into the context of books and reading; that new day deemed clinging together as strangers yet familiars the first step toward community. What an amazing fortress of knowledge that New York Public Library, preserving the empirical, the ephemeral, and, on that second day, emergent scholars and writers!

*Thadious M. Davis*  
University of Pennsylvania



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LET ME ACKNOWLEDGE AT THE START THAT I have never set foot on the Library Walk. My distant prospect is not, however, entirely unfaithful to the spirit of the place. For if I were to make the long trip from my home in Ven-

ice, California, to visit the Library Walk, I would probably avoid stepping on the tablets, thereby maintaining a crucial zone of separation (though it appears that birds—perhaps blackbirds—don't feel the same way, having

somehow left their tracks in the bronze medium of Wallace Stevens's poem).

A possible explanation for my hesitation to tread on the reliefs might be that an inscribed tablet embedded in the ground resembles a gravestone. After all, the years of the poet's birth and death are noted on this tablet, and the stanza inscribed addresses the phenomenon of disappearance, suggesting that physical absence makes possible an alternative (and perhaps preferable) mode of being.

Since the Library Walk gathers epigraphic plates, one could say that Forty-First Street between Fifth and Park has been transformed into a funerary aisle—not Poets' Corner but a literary hopscotch, a site recalling the recent history of that block as a "shadowy street" (according to the Grand Central Partnership Web site), providing access to the rear entrances to various properties, a back alley. One would also certainly want to emphasize, by contrast, that this sidewalk cemetery—which contains no corpses and has probably never seen a funeral—is an ornament of commercial development, an accessory to the recent arrival of "some of the city's swankiest hotels and coolest restaurants" in the neighborhood. Sometimes poetry gets to play with the big kids.

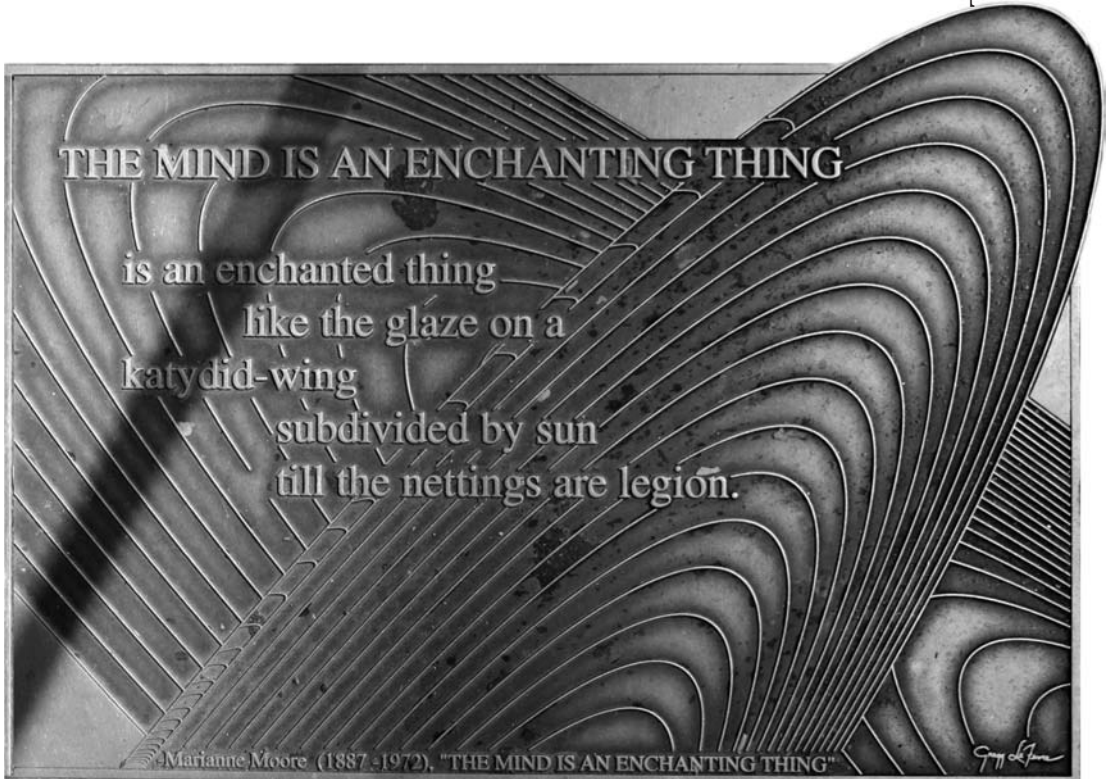
Let me return to the ancient genre and practice of epigraphy (inscribing words in

public places): since the inception of print culture, epigraphy has functioned primarily as a notable migration away from the site of the book toward other locations and material media, as in the case of graffiti or the tablets of the Library Walk. Epigraphy can perhaps even help to explain the image of Stevens's brick rendered on the screen before me as I write.

The migratory patterns of epigraphy—easily reversible—run from private to public, from contemplation to distraction, from the literary to the vernacular. In this sense, the installation of a scrap of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" in the memorial ground of the Library Walk anchors the poem's burgeoning afterlife in the boldest concrete terms. A Google search for the phrase "thirteen ways of looking at" yields millions of results: from *Thirteen Ways of Looking at TheBus* (Tinfish P, 2010), a chapbook of poems dabbling in Hawaiian pidgin, to "Thirteen Ways of Looking at an iPad," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Sarah Palin," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Fur-Covered Teacup," ad infinitum. Let's not forget: the dainty track of the Library Walk leads everywhere and nowhere, exposing a measureless columbarium of material innuendoes.

*Daniel Tiffany*

University of Southern California



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FROM THE BEGINNING, WE ARE GIVEN ALTERNATIVES—*enchanted?* *enchanting?* And the site sculptor, Gregg LeFevre—who does not falter—sets two wings askew from each other, like those two words. But the visual text doesn't look only like insect wings. It might be a glyph of the orbits of planets in two universes.

The root word means song (*canto*, *cantata*); the prefix *in-* intensifies. And Marianne Moore pivots with every line break; her rhyme scheme leaves an outrigger final line. *Enchanting* means charming, magical, transporting, mesmerizing, bewitching. Which also means studied. Artless charm is the highest art. Then this mind is an *enchanted* thing. Rapt you away with irresistible delight, rapture. And then I wrote *wrapped*, which reminded me of the cicada—its cartouche form with leaded glassine wings. The poem, of course, said “katydid.”

Do people confuse the words, *katydid* and *cicada*? Yes. One seems to be a folk etymology derived from the other. The words may cross over indifferently in regional dialects, despite

the distinctions of entomologists. Both are singing insects, along with crickets, katydids singing at night, cicadas during the day. The cicada has big, obvious, membranous wings; the katydid—green of color—less obvious wings but grasshopper-y hinged legs. Do I think Moore, that master of natural description, confused the two? Maybe, since her “glaze” and “nettings” are characteristic of the cicada wing. Yet it is another double and another enchantment to think of two when one is said.

Aphorisms preempt alternatives by the power of their rhetoric. Definitions do the same—by definition. This poem lists the elements that the mind is “like”—that flat-footed word, initiating simile, repeats five times. “The mind” is the center of these constellated crossings, but definitional plethora is the rule. Moore makes a droll—a semicontradictory—mix of definiteness in genre (aphorisms, definitions) and ceaseless mutability of statement. She closes by her own half proverb rejecting the proverbially inflexible: “Herod’s oath.”

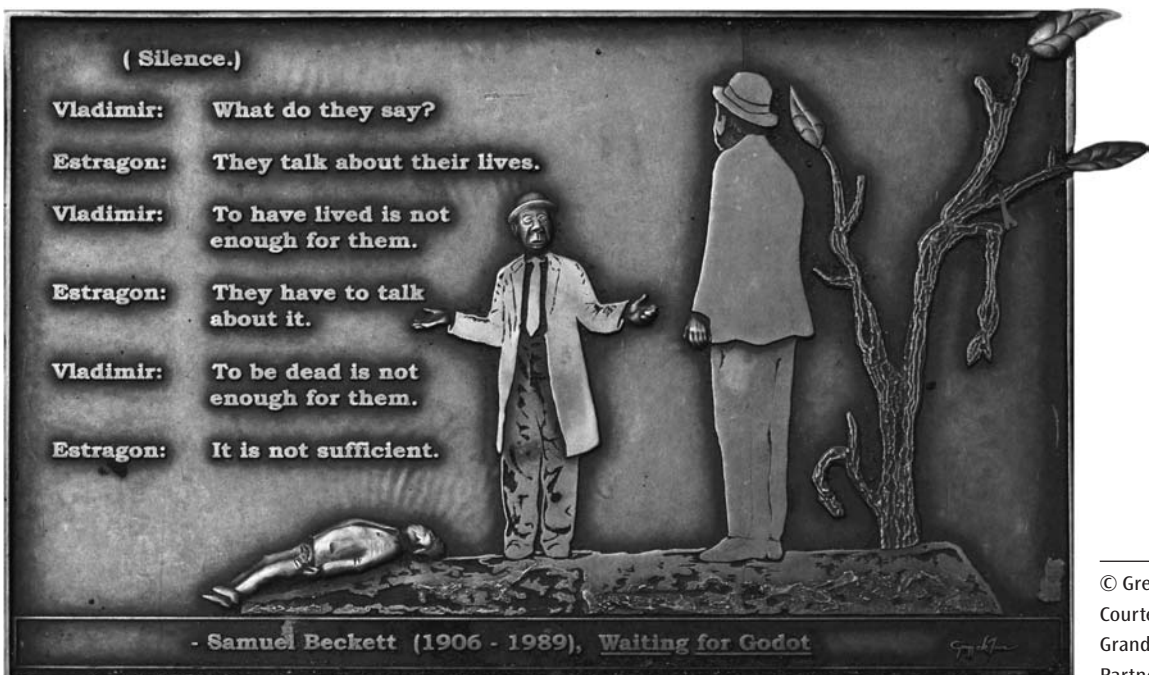
Each definition, each simile, appears absolute. Yet they loosely contradict each other by multiplication. They are “legion” and multiple, and each seems “truly unequivocal” but at the same time shows “conscientious inconsistency.”

Anything so sure of itself (like the gyroscope spinning exactly halfway through the poem—“trued by regnant certainty”) had better watch out. “Unconfusion” is a snarled-up and fundamentalist form of confusion quite the worse for being so certain. Changeableness, the mind changing its mind, the shimmer of difference, the willingness to rethink are exceedingly valuable. All doubles are

valuable, all opposites and alternatives are valuable, or at least “enchanted” and “enchanted.” The saturation by detail to which Moore insistently alludes produces and calibrates a moral ecology of vectors.

What has all this to do with a library? with a library walk? with the book-plate allusions of these elegant plaques? with citations as stepping stones in a sidewalk? Metamorphosis, tolerance, curiosity, attentiveness, and humility are certain advantages vitally though uncertainly emerging from the liberty of libraries.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis  
Temple University



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SAMUEL BECKETT PAID HIS ONLY VISIT TO NEW YORK in 1965, when he filmed, near the Brooklyn Bridge, a silent film called *Film*, starring Buster Keaton. One day, before the shooting, the two men were introduced to each other in Keaton’s hotel suite, where the

actor was watching a televised baseball game and uttered scarcely a word in response to the author’s efforts to engage him in conversation. Could Beckett have imagined in reality a taciturnity rivaling the silence he tried to achieve in his art?

Conversation is but marginally easier for the many couples he created, including the most famous, Vladimir and Estragon, who dress a bit like Keaton or Chaplin and whose nicknames—Didi and Gogo—are each a couple of a sort. Although tempted to separate, Didi and Gogo stay pretty much together, as now on Forty-First Street, each depending on the other to secure the sense that he himself exists.

The twosome is not self-sufficient, however, seeming always to depend on a third, such as the messenger who announces at the end of each act that Godot's arrival has been deferred once again and who is entreated to tell Godot at least that he saw Didi and Gogo. This seeing may suggest to spectators a potentially meaningful analogy with the activity to which they are devoting the greater part of their evening. Yet we are still waiting to see Godot, fifty-five years after the premiere, and the odds of his showing up and allowing the play to end are no better than the odds of the Mets' winning the World Series in 1965. Godot is forever on deck or forever off—if not off-Broadway, certainly offstage—and cannot be shown but only pointed to, talked about.

Gogo sums things up when he observes, "There's no lack of void." But when nothing is happening where they tarry, they may still fall prey to "all the dead voices." Voices in the head, barely audible, like those of infancy, reminding them that we all learn to talk by listening—but also voices that return unbidden and that talking alone can silence, as in the exchange on the Library Walk, first undertaken, as Gogo puts it, "so we won't hear."

No wonder we wonder where *Waiting for Godot* leaves us, since the voices emanating from out there on the stage resounded first in the mind of the playwright and then, as we leave the theater, begin to do so in our own as a part of the ceaseless cacophony of great cities. Nor should we be surprised if encountering a pair of gesticulating pedestrians conjures in us the visual memory of Didi and Gogo, along with a laugh whose unknown address brings us a wider berth on the sidewalk, even in New York. For like a residual image on the retina or the echo of dead voices, Beckett's theater is ambulatory, at home or homeless in you as in me, at the Cherry Lane Theatre and between Grand Central Terminal and the New York Public Library.

To be sure, the dead voices include a certain type bearing the only epithet that Didi, Gogo, and their creator consider more injurious than "sewer-rat" and "cretin"—namely, "critic!" And since Beckett's encounter with Keaton turned out like a *dialogue de muets*, we are free to imagine what might have been by casting them in the place of Vladimir and Estragon, talking about critics:

BUSTER. What do they say?

SAM. They talk about the play.

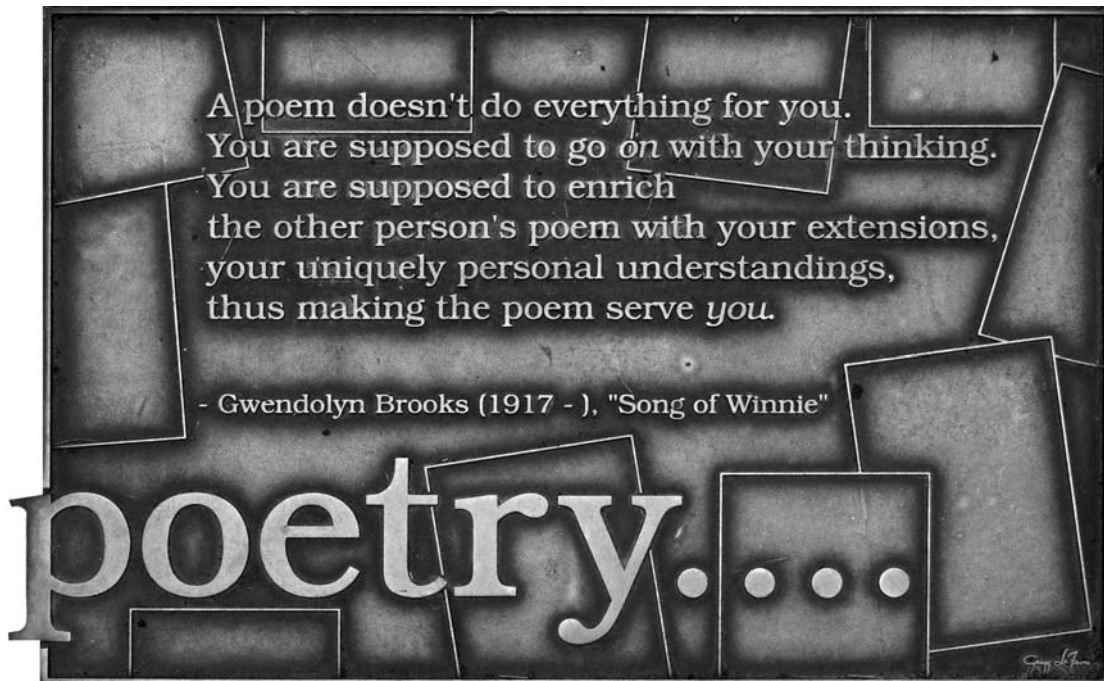
BUSTER. To have seen it is not enough for them.

SAM. They have to talk about it.

BUSTER. To have read it is not enough for them.

SAM. It is not sufficient.

*Thomas Trezise*  
Princeton University



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 Partnership.

TO WRITE THIS REFLECTION, I THOUGHT I should read the lines from Gwendolyn Brooks's "Song of Winnie" not only in the context of the poem from which they were taken but also in their physical context. Not knowing where on the Library Walk I'd find them, I went to Forty-First Street and Fifth Avenue one Saturday morning in June and began to walk east, the New York Public Library behind me and Grand Central Terminal ahead. I didn't have to go far. This passage was right by my starting point, near the northwest corner of Madison and Forty-First.

To get to it, I had to navigate through a construction site where a group of workers were digging up the sidewalk. When I saw the plaque, I paused, whereupon a hot-dog vendor approached me to ask if I wanted to buy something. As I stood and read the lines from the poem, pedestrians hurried past and around me. But a few people hesitated to see what I was staring at before continuing on their way. And some even noticed the other plaques, giving them a cursory glance as they headed down the street.

What better place to encounter lines taken from works of literature than on a New York City sidewalk?

In this passage from a poem first published in the collection *Gottschalk and the Grande Tarantelle* (1989) and reprinted in the posthumously published volume "*In Montgomery*" and *Other Poems* (2003), Brooks enters the mind of Winnie Mandela during the twenty-seven years when her then husband, Nelson Mandela, was imprisoned for sabotage and other charges associated with his antiapartheid activism. Throughout her long career as a poet, Brooks often imagined the inner lives and dilemmas of people whose individuality had been lost either to their hypervisibility as historical figures or to their invisibility as people marginalized because of their gender, race, or class. In this poem, Brooks asks the reader to imagine the internal conflict Winnie Mandela must have experienced as she carried the weight of life as a political symbol, for she achieved iconic status as a woman who shouldered the burden of both her own activism and a

family that had been torn apart by the system of apartheid.

Inspired by her mother's religious faith and her father's political commitments, Winnie came of age determined to resist petty, self-centered vanities. Fueled by outrage at the violence black South Africans endured and worn down by the weight of loss and grief, she nevertheless yearned for space for beauty and contemplation. For her, poetry provided a language "to express *my* nuances."

The reader who encounters these lines at Forty-First and Madison is invited into community and struggle not only with this poem but with all poems. Winnie, the narrator, reminds us that a poem, her poem, is not an end in itself. Rather, it ought to inspire us to expand our thinking. In the encounter with a poem, we make and enrich its meaning and carry its legacy forward.

Valerie Smith  
Princeton University



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**M**EMORIES ARE LIKE AGING RELATIVES. THEIR rhythms are never quite right. They arrive too early or too late at airports or bus stations, expecting you to be there, waiting, never changed, just a bit thin, ready to be plied with sweet remedies and bitter complaints. You wonder, How could they have managed all that luggage?!

Your arms ache. You carry what is yours to carry. Strangers look on charmed and be-

mused. You revert to forty-seven, twenty-three, sixteen. Shuttle them home. Your home! "Your place," they insist. You don't bother to argue. They putter and purr, fret and meddle. You persevere, make silent promises, linger overlong in the basement or the bath. They disappear again, soon or late, leaving funny smells and rumpled sheets. Each of you retreats to the far corners. You rest, knowing that come holiday time it will all begin once more.



And just when you have settled into a vaguely comfortable truce, they begin their vulgar, maddening departures; they falter and stumble, inexplicably ask for your help, begin to turn up long-forgotten secrets, smother you in the freezing warmth of curses and kisses. They leave the strange feel of soft, weak hands in your palms. They die.

Bells are rung, bills paid. The summer returns. Still, just when you think that you are on the verge of remembering something, something novel and profound, you find yourself turning quick and upset from the telephone receiver after a young voice asks, "When are you coming to visit?"

Lucille Clifton, American poet, was born with twelve fingers. She died with only ten. She claimed to be able to trace her lineage to the African nation of Benin. She published early work in the collection *The Poetry of the Negro* after having been brought to the attention of the collection's editor, Langston Hughes, by the novelist Ishmael Reed. She won the National Book Award for her collection *Blessing the Boats*. She was nominated twice for the Pulitzer Prize, once for *Two-Headed Woman* and again for *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969–1980*.

We remember her now because she refuses to be forgotten. Her style, deceptively simple, deliciously direct, never fell into the trap of either disinterested artifice or too quickly outdated protest. Her works are meant to be held in the hands and read. She reminds her readers that their lives, their frankly common lives, are the poet's proper inspiration. One imagines she would have laughed had she heard that her poems were clearly Whitmanesque. That's what memories do. They look at you disparagingly from the corners of frosted eyes when you offer overblown compliments. They change subjects, reminding you of schoolwork and laundry. They wonder out loud what you will think up next.

No bother. Every word has its own weight, every memory its life. This is the one simple fact of which poets insistently speak. They work; they linger; they relate the outlines of a fantastic story, the details of which they themselves seem unable to remember but unwilling to forget.

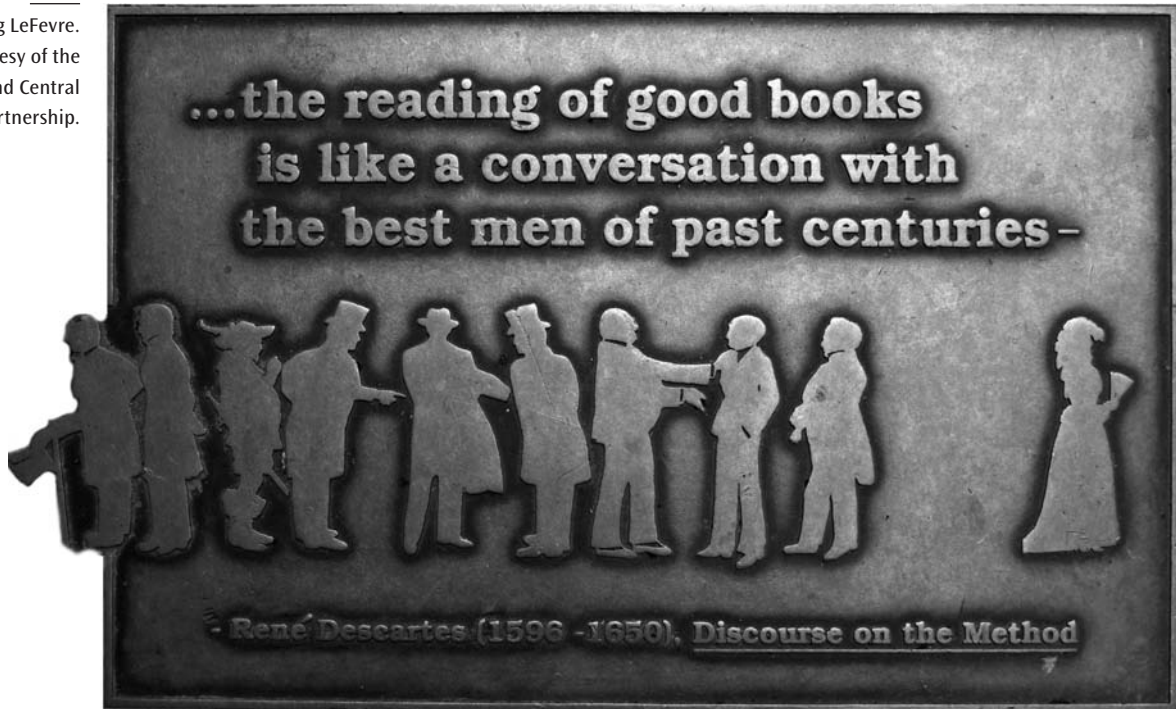
*Robert Reid-Pharr*

Graduate Center, City University of New York



Pam Roller.

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IF YOU WALK DOWN THE SOUTH SIDE OF EAST Forty-First Street, you'll see that of the forty-eight plaques laid down six years ago on that side of the street, ten are missing. What happened? The need to run electric and media cables to new buildings called for drilling beneath the surface where the plaques had been, though plaques removed for this purpose are later reinstalled (according to a conversation with Gregg LeFevre on 22 June 2010). One of the culprits must have been the giant Starbucks on Library Walk. When I was in the neighborhood this June, I saw a customer in there bent over a newspaper. Would this be a Cartesian example of an immaterial soul connecting with the thought of others through the abstract, timeless process of reading?

No. Descartes, though his is one of the missing plaques, would hardly disapprove of this modern reader absorbed in the events of the day. For the philosopher-scientist, the past and conversations with its great men were only a prelude to the groundbreaking present. Right after this line, he bluntly dismisses the ancients for their inadequacy as writers on

ethics: "I compared the moral writings of the ancient pagans to very proud and magnificent palaces built only on sand and mud." So Descartes's sense of the limited value of "conversations with the best men of past centuries" has something in common with the fluctuations in the Library Walk project, which show likewise that the past is past.

Let me offer an interpretation of the image on the Descartes plaque: men talking in a group while a woman walks away to the right. She is, of course, the woman writer excluded from the company of "the best men of past centuries." But in the context of the Library Walk, might they be designers conceptualizing a composite memorial to literary history, she a pedestrian who confronts the physical fact of the vanished plaques? Could we see her, along with Descartes, as a critic of monuments to dead writers?

The emphasis on the present as material time rather than as conceptual frame can be seen in a pair of letters between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia. In a letter to the philosopher pressing him to explain how the

immaterial soul can move the physical body, Elizabeth laments that she hasn't been able to adopt his practice of meditation because her worldly occupations leave her "inutile à toute autre chose" 'useless for anything else.' His response (28 June 1643) is less than sympathetic: he has retired to the countryside precisely to avoid such demands on his time. But he also tells her, astonishingly, that he has never spent more than a couple of hours a day in philosophical reflection: abstract thought benefits from—even requires—"le relâche des sens et le repos de l'esprit" 'sensory and mental relaxation.' Does the body, after all, have claims on the soul? Descartes assures Elizabeth that a living philosopher does more in a day than think. Like his narrative of his step-by-step mental progress in *Meditations*, Descartes's example of the interplay of reflection and relaxation dem-

onstrates that his mind is a moving, variety-loving thing. Might the disappearance of the plaque that, tombstonelike, froze one of his ideas in bronze correspond better to this quality of his mind—any mind—than to the permanently sculpted set of ideas that the Library Walk was originally planned to preserve? And could we see the woman in profile as a practical, on-the-ground observer who notices the material dilapidation of the memorial?

Leaving Forty-First Street, I peered in to see the same reader in Starbucks, this time with an enormous coffee by his side. I took this as a further example of the interplay between body and spirit. You need a lot of caffeine to make your way through the Sunday *New York Times*.

Ann R. Jones  
Smith College



Pam Roller.

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BECAUSE THE LIBRARY WALK IS ON MY WAY home from Grand Central Terminal, I've stepped on this plaque many times. If you tend to look down while you walk, it's nice to have reading material. But why this text? And who is speaking in it? The genre of the quotation would have us imagine it as the utterance of Thomas Jefferson. But anyone walking down this street in Manhattan can recognize that as a generic conceit. Urban bronze texts have a more complex phenomenology. What we are dealing with is a kind of institutional text, built into the environment at what must have been considerable expense and labor.

A little inquiry (and one of the plaques themselves) discloses that the corporate agencies finding utterance here are many, involving the New York Public Library, city government, and the Grand Central Partnership. The last is the biggest of the business improvement districts, which embody the kind of corporate-government alliance that is increasingly the norm in capitalist democracies;

the board of the Grand Central Partnership is a who's who of major real estate interests in New York. As a sign on the street explains, the artist Gregg LeFevre executed the plaque, but "Where the press is free, and every man able to read, all is safe" is no more an utterance of his than (in the sidewalk setting) Jefferson's. Walkers of the street must understand that this can only be the utterance of those who have the power and coordination to get such plaques embedded in the infrastructure of the city.

Thus, it is not surprising that there is a certain piety to the texts, as well as a certain didacticism. The combined interests of the library, the city, and the business improvement district are involved in a complex address to pedestrians, an address in which the monumentality of the work militates against the idea of an author or "speaker." Part of what the monumental text is doing is quoting, or embedding, another kind of utterance, imagined as that of an individual author, as a way

of ventriloquizing corporate speech. How poorly all this is grasped by the usual concepts of close reading!

If we think of the utterance conventionally, as belonging to Jefferson's letter to Charles Yancey (identified in quotation marks on the plaque, as though it were a title), we might recognize it as a classic statement of the principles and promise of the public sphere. Jefferson, as we would say, appeals to the idea of an educated, alert, and even suspicious citizenry. The image on the plaque turns the quotation into a comment about newspapers then and now. Within the letter, the paragraph is more about the need for funded education in Virginia to combat the "toryism, fanaticism, and indifferentism to their own State, which

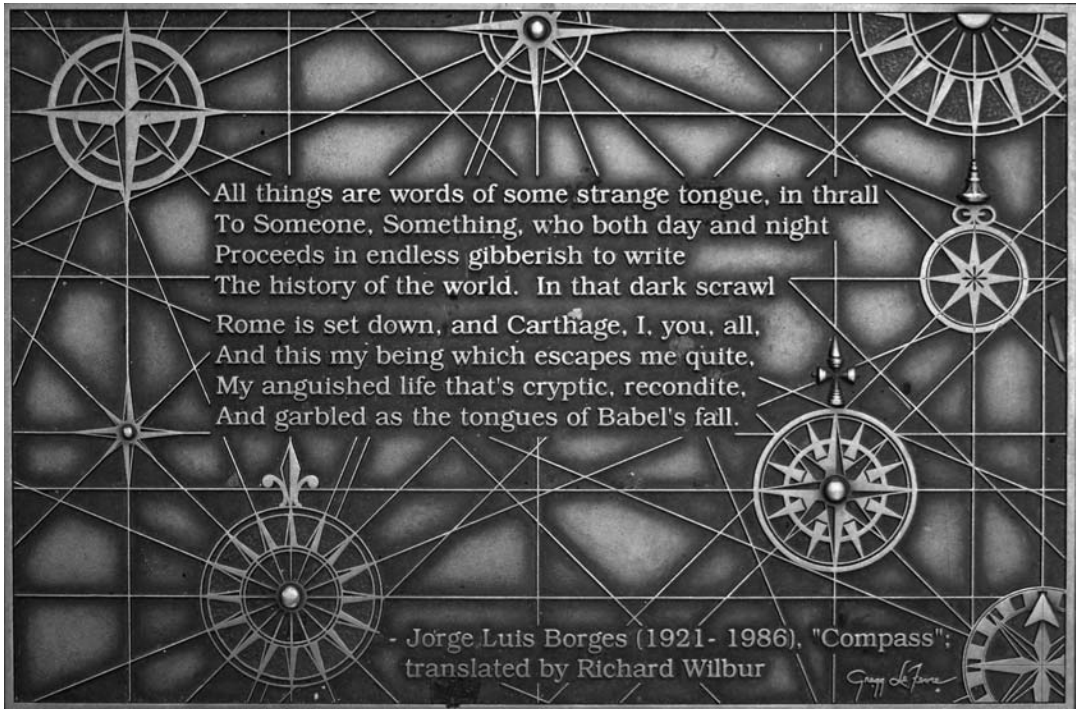
we now send our youth to bring from those of New England." (Jefferson was then particularly exercised about the evangelicalism of Yale and Harvard and Andover.) Either way, literacy itself is aligned against power, and circulation appears as the security of the social.

True, the idea seems now a bit naive. Jefferson did not anticipate media consolidation and the News Corp. He did not anticipate the displacement of print journalism by the Web. Least of all could he have anticipated the irony that his remark would be recontextualized as the praise of property in the pedagogy of the corporate state. Look, it says, we've beautified this real estate. All is safe.

*Michael Warner*  
Yale University



—  
Pam Roller.



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IT HAD TO HAPPEN THIS WAY, AND I SHOULD have expected it. It was a day like many others this summer. Muggy, noisy, hurried: just a normal, almost-on-time arrival at Penn Station.

The line for a cab was long; I called and said I would walk over to Forty-Second and Third. I had enough time for a brisk zigzag toward Jorge Luis Borges's plaque—an unplanned destination. The path became clearer, and so did the reason for skipping the cab ride. I saw some plaques and then my "assignment." Smiling, I read a fragment from a younger Borges (he was born in 1899, not in 1921 as engraved on the plaque, though we could fathom that he would have felt and known *Fervor de Buenos Aires* as a two-year-old child). I didn't linger too long in front of the plaque, with its design hinting at the music of the spheres. Though some would attribute this encounter to coincidence (standing in front of that plaque when I hadn't even thought of it), I celebrate it as another installment in an ongoing conversation. After all, there is an order in the universe, and this was merely further confir-

mation—or, at the very least, a puzzle piece to confound and intrigue nonbelievers.

Since birth—a tradition tells us—we seek to read and unveil that which we knew until that moment when oblivion began to fight the power of memory. In the end, perhaps we'll just recognize the thin outline of our own face, or glimpse the force that commands being out of every word. Perhaps we'll know the secret of a contemplative pose or the frightening advance of hatred and violence or the joy of feeling and loving that which may never be ours. We may succumb to the silence that begets defeat or impose a view of history as a foretold chronicle of empire that will never be. We may continue to trust a language that is divine by human decree or that is sacred by the will of that "Someone" who still allows us to prod every sign, every word, all things that are forever named, or lightly view it as "endless gibberish," accept what is, and abandon the search for meaning.

This compass (fixed as it is on bronze) toys with space; this cemented, eternal plaque teases time. A choice was made to have Borges

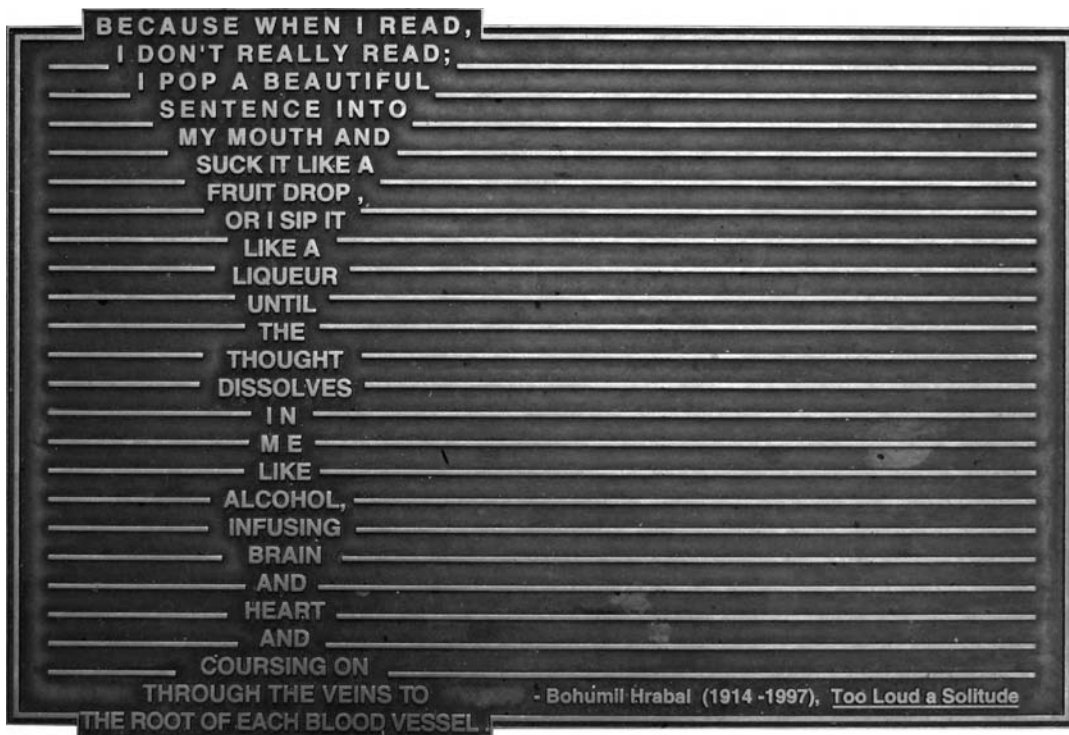
chart a path along the Library Walk. Barely above the gray sidewalk, his words move us to halt and ponder history's footsteps. The tongues that inherited humanity's most defiant act rolled across Rome and Carthage and now this city's landscape. For now the poet is resigned to being just a garbled passage—as the golem was a miserable image of human-

ity's lofty ambitions—a passing iteration in an unending string of events.

A plaque in a path: a pause for language, for human creativity, for the divine spark of reason, for the ability to interpret, understand, and accept.

*Saúl Sosnowski*

University of Maryland, College Park



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WHEN ASKED TO WRITE ON THE LIBRARY WALK, I hesitated. I looked at the plaques as grave-stones of literature and the walk as a cemetery of sorts. It appeared to be tangible proof that the art of reading is dead. Like the marble or granite slabs in cold American kitchens where no one cooks, the plates signal the end of reading. Will anyone, having stepped on Bohumil Hrabal's words, enter the library and check out his book?

The quotation itself also discouraged me. Literature is not a fruit drop; it is an ax for the frozen sea in us, as another Prague writer, Franz Kafka, once told us. But then I remembered that fruit drops were not always easy to get in Czechoslovakia or in neighboring Poland, where, at the time of the first, samizdat publication of *Too Loud a Solitude*, in 1976, I was living. Neither were books. To get a good one, you had to have a friend in a bookstore or

library. For half a pound of coffee discreetly placed in the hands of a bookstore clerk, you could buy a William Faulkner, a Romain Rolland, or a coupon for the new encyclopedia. As a girl interested in books but also in candy, I spent several summers on the veranda reading and sucking on cheap mints. Samizdat books came and went through the house because my mother taught literature in high school, and her students brought her a variety of illegal publications. The books usually had black-and-white covers without the author's name, and you could go to prison for owning them. I was too young to read most of them but old enough to understand that they were valuable, desirable, and important. When, a couple years later, I smuggled into Poland a paperback of George Orwell's *1984* in my luggage, I did it aware of the possible consequences and convinced that it was worth the risk. Books back then in Eastern Europe were not like candy. They were like bread. You couldn't live without them.

Just before *Amazon* went into business, I taught east-central European literature at the University of Georgia. Sated with an abundance of books and candy, not to mention li-

quor, my students were only mildly interested in Ishmael Kadaré's *Chronicle in Stone*, which we were reading, until an older man who was just auditing the course for the heck of it said in class that he had checked all Kadaré's books out of the university library, was reading them, and loved them. The other students perked up and by the end of the period were begging him to let them borrow the books. Willy-nilly, the greedy reader had created an environment in which worthwhile books were hard to find. The demand was instantaneous.

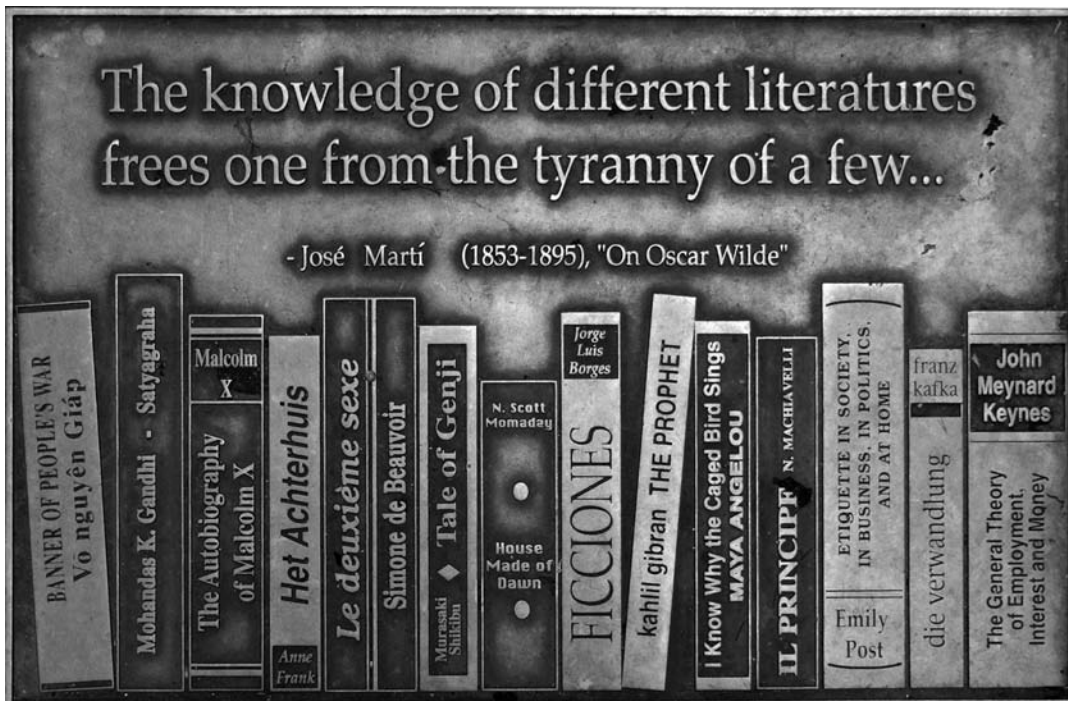
Ostensibly a book about the communist crackdown on culture, *Too Loud a Solitude* can be read in our context as a painful commentary on the death of culture, pushed out by mass culture. Who still reads? Some of the best books are to be found at remainder bookstores or for one cent at *Amazon*. I'm sure they are recycled as well or even burned. I long ago stopped asking my students what was the last good book they read outside class. Elsewhere, Hrabal surely smiles, knowing that pilsner wins over Pulitzer.

Katarzyna Jerzak  
University of Georgia



Pam Roller.





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THIS IS THE LAST OF THE PLAQUES THAT ADORN the right-hand sidewalk on Forty-First Street as pedestrians, facing the sporadic one-way motor traffic, approach the grand entrance of the New York Public Library from Park Avenue. A compact journey takes those who care to walk it along a lane sprinkled with words whose sources range from the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, Yeats, and Borges to the wit of Gertrude Stein and the gravitas of Marcus Aurelius. The José Martí plaque marks the Library Walk's point of cartographic closure but also its renewed dissemination. It is as if the inscription had been placed as an impossibly conclusive recapitulation of the concert of voices that pave this zigzag literary path. On this secluded, alleylike street, lined with loading docks and small businesses, literature strives to overcome the marginality of its location, heralding the route as one that leads us to the front door of the city's most revered yet accessible archival temple.

Martí's words come from his ambivalent review of the public lecture Oscar Wilde gave in New York City during the Irish writer's

grand tour in 1882. Martí had arrived in the city only a few weeks before. He had already embarked on his definitive life-long exile from the tyrannical Spanish colonial regime in Cuba, coming to New York following his 1881 expulsion from Venezuela for his opposition to the dictatorial government of the president, Antonio Guzmán Blanco. The chronicle on Wilde was one of the many hundreds of newspaper articles that Martí wrote between 1882 and 1891 to "translate" the social, cultural, and political turmoil of the United States during the Gilded Era for Spanish American reading audiences across the hemisphere.

Martí's stumbling on Wilde was a critical encounter with innovative trends in European literature and with their vitalistic conceptions of life as art, for him disconcerting and rather queer. It was also a riveting intersection between the warrior of ascetic morality who, in his struggle against colonial tyranny, would die for Cuba's independence in the first battle of the War of 1895 and the aesthete who, with no less moral conviction, advocated an autonomous realm for art against the subjugating rational

instrumentalization of experience in modernity. Martí synthesizes this entanglement between the warrior and the poet, between belligerence and beauty, with a single image in the Wilde chronicle: in the modern world, art is a force “that gnaws on the beak of the vulture that endeavors to devour Prometheus.”

*Tyranny* is the key word in the quotation. Literature can be as tyrannical a force as colonialism and dictatorship, so emancipation from it is urgently needed. Left to the authoritarian inclinations of self-appointed cultural gendarmes, it can confine the horizon of the spirit, making of the many one, and harness that “untamable human longing” (as Martí puts it) “of being outside oneself, so that humankind can live content in itself.” Just as John Adams saw democracy as a horizontal force of the many that keeps

in check individual will toward autocracy, Martí saw in the embrace of many literatures a practice to foster modern democratic cultures and sensitivities.

The plaque beautifully conveys Martí's demand for a positive impulse toward difference by arranging an assortment of books in different languages (although all limited to the Roman alphabet) in a disorderly and anachronistic manner. Not supported by bookends, they push against the left and right edges of the frame as if resting on other books that dwell outside our field of vision. They may be inside the library across the avenue, toward which we walk, led by the harmoniously cacophonous concert of voices that pave this backstage alley.

*Agnes Lugo-Ortiz*  
University of Chicago

**NEW YORK IS A CITY OF WALKING. NOT THE DISTRACTED walking of the Parisian flâneur but the urgent movement of commerce's subject. One is thus not surprised to observe pedestrians treading hastily over the bronze plaques that make up the Library Walk. Only the presence of a photographer draws their eyes to the ground, and then fleetingly. Caught in the mimesis that photography demands, they look briefly down and observe the image of writing.**

Not writing but its image. And then again: the image as writing.

There are ninety-six bronze plaques, laid into the concrete like burial markers. Or forty-eight, each appearing twice. If we start to recoil from the plaque as an antiquated gesture, freighted with morbid sentiment, we are recalled by this doubling. For it evades the reduction of signs to mere reference.

“Public art”—the art of a world bifurcated by capital—is taxed by this demand and tends toward monumentality: an exaggerated literality and excess of scale almost never capable of irony. However, there is irony on the Library Walk. For every literal figuration, there is something lurking off the (bronze) page that bids us engage the ambiguity, which is to say textuality, of the image and thus the literarity of the literature invoked in the citations underfoot.

To be sure, there is literal reference. A citation from Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings,” is accompanied by an image of a bird, whose outstretched wings breach the frame of the plaque, staging the violation of norms asserted in Chopin's novel.



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However, another plaque displays José Martí's claim that "[t]he knowledge of different literatures frees one from the tyranny of a few . . .," a citation inscribed above a bookshelf whose volumes constitute one of several insurgent readings on the Library Walk. These volumes include the literature not only of tyranny, from Machiavelli's *Il Principe* to Emily Post's *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home*, but also of oppositionality. Võ Nguyễn Giáp's *Banner of People's War* sits aside Malcolm X's *Autobiography* and Mohandas K. Gandhi's *Satyagraha*. N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* testifies to the Americas' histories as settler colonies. And feminism appears in Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*.

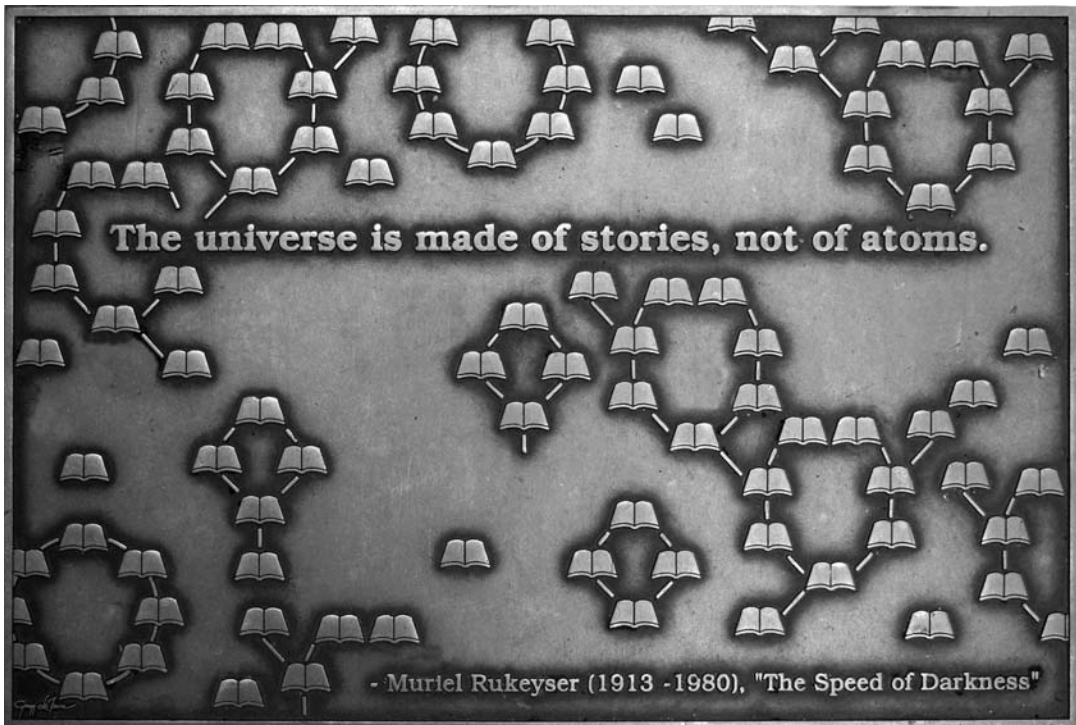
The bookshelf functions as a kind of metonym for the artist's, Gregg LeFevre's, biography. The titles register opposition to the American wars in Southeast Asia, the discovery of feminism, the encounter with pacifist anticoloniality, the alternative nationalism of black Islam, and aboriginal claims to sover-

eignty. If this life history indexes a moment in United States national history, the literature cited leaks over those borders, as does the list of authors whose words are reproduced in the forty-eight (or ninety-six) plaques.

What exceeds those limits is a function sometimes of what is beyond the frame, sometimes of the gaps inscribed within.

A quotation from Descartes's *Discourse on the Method* is accompanied by a historically dissonant procession of characters attired in Dickensian costume. The multitude of male figures, assembled to simulate a public sphere, is accompanied by a single female held apart by a vacant space, a chasm inscribed and produced by gender norms. Her posture turns her away from the men and toward the plaque's frame, implying a movement toward the outside analogous to critique.

LeFevre invites these readings not only by the repeated breaches of the frame but also by the celebration of authors who include, in addition to the usual suspects of canonically white masculinity, those forced



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to inhabit the predicament of otherness, that position in which particular experience is never permitted to signify the universal—except in literature.

In this sense, it is useless to ask after the absent authors: where is Shakespeare or Chaucer, where are Achebe and Tagore? The plaques testify to a concept of literature as something that can never be fully present—even when incarnated in the ancient form of relief. Indeed, there is an undertone that would defend this more radical concept of the literary. Muriel Rukeyser's statement "The universe is made of stories, not of atoms" is accompanied by an image of a chemical compound, with books in the place of atoms. Gertrude Stein's plaque bears her "remark" that "remarks are not literature." This citation is embedded in what appears to be gibberish. In fact, it is a series of statements by the artist about the oft-repeated accusation against Stein's writing. The statements are written backward—hence their initial appearance of meaninglessness. Reading back-

ward, one discerns: "a good deal of gertrude stein's writing seems to me to be not far from gibberish." But the text ends, at the top, with a simple repudiation of its own game: "this is not gibberish."

A grammatical negative can never efface what it attempts to contradict (Freud, another absence). So a call for judgment hides in the defensive gesture, like D. H. Lawrence's snake. But judgment is not without danger. It is thus instructive to know that not all the plaques made for the Library Walk remain in place. Erasure remains the risk of all writing and the goal of all power.

According to LeFevre, there was a plaque devoted to Sappho, admonishing, "When anger spreads through the breath, guard thy tongue from barking idly." The image featured the naked back of Sappho, she having turned from the reader. The plaque was removed from the sidewalk, ostensibly because the smooth surface of the woman's nakedness became too slippery when wet, threatening to take the feet out from under passersby. Le-

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 .hsirebbig yllaer ton si siht dias i sa .hsirebbig morf raf ton eb ot em ot smees gnitirw s'niets  
 edurtreg fo laed doog a .egduj ot i ma ohw ,niaga neht tub .sdrawkcab gnitirw ylerem  
 tub hsirebbir ton - Gertrude Stein (1874 -1946), *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

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 Partnership.

Fevre acknowledges that this might have been an alibi.

Whatever the case, one may lament, in a time of war, the absence of a poet who pre-

ferred the image of her beloved to the beauty of the soldier.

*Rosalind Morris*  
 Columbia University