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# Disseminar: Education at the Limit of Common Sense



*Dominik Zechner*

**Abstract.** This article introduces the term “disseminar” to name the desire to burst out of the institutional confines of education. This departure interrupts the discursive and institutional regimes that regulate the educational enterprise and allows for the enactment of alternative pedagogies. While disseminar has an inherently emancipatory thrust, its project faces various perils. First, by leaving the institutional apparatus behind, disseminar creates a vacuum of authority which runs the risk of being occupied by coercive elements. Second, as disseminar disconnects itself from given opinion and common sense, the knowledge it creates appears increasingly esoteric. The article assesses these political and idiomatic dangers by discussing examples in Friedrich Nietzsche’s work and John Williams’s novel *Stoner*. It suggests that disseminar can avoid its pitfalls by interrupting its own interruption, incessantly bursting into the outside of education’s confines.

**Keywords.** Common Sense; Education; Interruption; Nietzsche; *Stoner*

In October 1983, Bruce Springsteen recorded the song “No Surrender,” which appeared on his seventh studio album, *Born in the U.S.A.*, to be released the following year. Like other works of his from that era, the song features a brief excursus expounding the pedagogical imperative: “Well, we bursted out of class / Had to get away from those fools / We learned more from a three-minute record, baby / Than we ever learned in school.” Situated at the very beginning of the song, the four lines raise a question of philosophical significance as they concern the proper place of education. Where does true learning happen? While

the educational institution might be the place where one studies the proper conjugation of the verb “to burst,” what transpires within the classroom walls is not actual learning but certified foolishness. The educational moment and momentum occur not within the institution but as the explosion of its confines. While one name for this explosion might be “rock’n’roll,” its relevance is by no means reducible to an artform whose rebellious prescriptions may, in the meantime, have petrified into historical cliché. The optimistic observation that “We learned more from a three-minute record, baby / Than we ever learned in school” not only posits the artform itself as the antidote to the empty tedium of schoolwork—more importantly, it designates the musings that happen outside of class as genuine acts of “learning.” Listening to a rock’n’roll record would constitute its own type of coursework, a form of rogue seminar, whose condition of possibility lies in an act of departure. The true curriculum is taught beyond the classroom’s threshold, its pedagogical promise realizes itself only once we’ve “burst” out of class.

That the proper place of education could turn out to be New Jersey is something I would once have found quite unlikely. The Springsteenian supposition was, however, put to the test not too long ago when the State University of New Jersey failed to bring the contract negotiations with its faculty unions to a fair conclusion. Union members authorized a strike, and for about a week in Spring 2023, teaching at Rutgers was effectively shut down. Such a faculty strike raises important questions about the nature of teaching. If to read books and to discuss them constitutes part of the labor of literature professors, do continued reading and conversing signal a crossing of the picket line once a strike is called? While I pose the question facetiously, it nonetheless highlights an important aspect of intellectual labor, which cannot be halted, especially not in a moment of strike. If the event of the strike, as has been argued, releases a certain revolutionary potential (Benjamin 39–61), this release is of course not detached from the demands of thought. If to strike means to remain intellectually engaged, then a striking intellectual is a true (oxy)moron.

By another name, to strike is to interrupt. What is being interrupted are the procedural routines of bureaucracy, the discursive traffic around policy, flows of capital, assumptions of common sense. Placing a caesura within the reigning economies of discourse and money could open a space that allows for the imagination of alternative worlds, heterotopias, other ways relating to one another, another language. The interruption that constitutes a strike therefore belongs to the

*praxis* of any theory whose concepts ought to remain relevant in the world outside the classroom. While Marx famously bemoaned that “[t]he philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways” while “the point is to *change* it” (123), the critical theorist rejoins by insisting on the practical dimension of all profession of theory. For to practice “theory,” whatever its concrete form or expression, is to be disruptive, to cause interruptions and pauses. To practice theory is to strike. It entertains an essential affinity to the event of the strike. The education it imagines cannot itself be interrupted if causing interruptions constitutes the core of its teaching. This does not have to mean that you ought to “faint from ennui every minute you’re not smashing the state apparatus,” as Eve Sedgwick (146) provocatively put it, but it means that our teaching cannot be dissociated from the act of interrupting the given.

Rather than a halting of thought, striking intellectual labor causes its displacement. If one of the weaknesses of theory is its location in the metaphorical ivory tower, the constitution of a picket line dislodges this fantasy of isolated knowledge production and disseminates its elements into the shared surrounding world we call “campus.” While the picket line interrupts and shuts down pre-given campus operations such as the arrival of instructors at pre-assigned classrooms in order to teach a pre-scheduled course, it does not shut down the intellectual dynamic on campus as such. To the contrary, it heightens this dynamic by politicizing it, which is not to say that something hitherto non-political suddenly appears in a politically relevant guise, but that the act of moving intellectual labor out of the classroom and into the streets in itself emphasizes the political stakes of what had been the subject of in-class discussion. It’s one thing to administer an exam on Benjamin’s theory of the proletarian general strike—and it’s another thing altogether to enact part of its doctrine.

This politicization is all the more relevant for the study of literature. If literature, as Paul Celan suggested, is responsible for enunciating a “counterword” (3) against the currents of common sense and pre-given discourse, its language teaches us ways linguistically and poetically to enact a caesura. “Poetry,” Lacoue-Labarthe wrote with an eye to Celan, “occurs where language, contrary to all expectations, gives way” (136). If poetry counters expectation, this means that it runs against the currents of given opinion and the calculability it maintains. In this view, language gives way in the sense of opening a path toward what lies beyond what is and can be expected. The condition of possibility for this eventful space of the uncalculated is the interruption of language

by the poetic word. This word is not (yet) recognized by the discursive mechanisms of common discourse, it is yet to be domesticated, and therefore harbors the explosive power to blast open discursive regimes, allowing us to explore the linguistic spaces situated beyond. If poetry causes language to “give way,” its nature is by definition uncontainable, which also holds true for the spatial medium of the classroom. Teaching poetry is a way of domesticating its explosive language as long as such instruction runs under the assumption that its object of inquiry won’t threaten its pedagogical context and the scientific parameters that guide its exploration.

As she interrupts the given, the striking literature professor allegorizes the occurrence of poetry which lies in enunciating the counterword. This does not only mean that poetry is inherently political, it also means that the striking disposition is naturally poetic. If this counterword disrupts the political, economic, and discursive regimes that regulate our coexistence, its enunciation does not serve the purpose of opposing an inauthentic commonality with the possibility of an authentic one. The idea of an authentic community belongs to what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “myth,” and literary language is tasked not with establishing a new mythology in place of the interrupted obsolete one, but with a continued incision into all myth-making projects. The essence of literature, Nancy therefore states, “is composed only in the act that interrupts, with a single stroke—by an incision and/or an inscription—the shaping of the scene of myth” (71–72). If literature, however, performs an incision into myth’s origin, this origin belongs ontologically to the structure of literature, which comes about only through the cut applied to myth. Literature is then another name for myth interrupted, which is also to say that literature, to the extent that myth belongs to its structure, is an interruption of itself. As permanent self-interruption, literature is forever on strike—and it cannot totalize itself into a completed or completable political artifact. The counterword runs counter—also to itself—which means that every “common sense” that literature could oppose to the common discursive regimes into which it rips amounts to a *sensus non-communis* that would incessantly interrupt its own proclivity for myth. Nancy thus states that, as far as literature is concerned, “only the limit is common, and the limit is not a place, but the sharing of places, their spacing. There is no common place” (73). “Spacing” is another way of naming the way-giving quality of poetic language, which does not establish a new territory but acts as that which breaks out of all legislated and shared territory. In this sense, it constantly negotiates the limit that marks the

non-place where “way” is “given,” constantly. This limit cannot mark a “common ground” as it is the relentless and unceasing breaking of ground through acts of interruption.

Part of what I am going to argue in the course of this article is that the rejection of the common place that Nancy locates at the heart of literary expression must hold true for the teaching of literature, if such teaching should have any relevance beyond the mere transmission and reproduction of factual knowledge. If literature consists in an interruption of myth—whether this myth be called “neoliberalism,” “fascism,” “identity,” “America,” “freedom,” etc.—the act of this inscriptive incision cannot be dissociated from the project of subjecting literature to pedagogical inquiries. Otherwise put, the pedagogy derived from the study of literature would have to embrace the spatial crack-up provoked by the poetic counterword. It would have to permanently interrupt itself and through this interruption allow for a spacing that would fundamentally dislodge the pedagogical enterprise, decenter it, and drive it outside of its pre-given confines. The event of a faculty strike is paradigmatic for such displacement, but to the extent that the strike—also in the sense of a punch, a blast, a violent incision—belongs to the being of literary expression, the way-giving quality of literature is all the more effective when no official project or political enterprise, such as the organized resignation from duty, attaches to it.

I call this way-giving, counter-mythological, and inherently disruptive quality of literary education “disseminar.” The term gives name to the disseminating quality of the professing of literature to the extent that such professing can only stay true to itself by leaving its designated place, questioning its pre-given setting, and interrupting the laws that govern its discursive exchanges. Disseminar means that the proper place of education is not the classroom, nor any other designated space within the managerially regulated cartographies of our campus infrastructure. When Nancy holds that “there is no common place,” this statement is not made for rhetorical effect but to articulate the literary truth that the literal and figurative common places that accredit our coexistence proffer sites of poetic incision. Common places allow for the commerce of myth, which is why poetic language seeks a way-giving departure from their precincts.

This is not to say, however, that all forms of displacement are inherently politically desirable, which was made obvious by the recent trend toward an increasing virtualization of our learning environments. One of the ways in which the University responded to the most intense periods of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic consisted in the accelerated

digitization of teaching practices which transformed the parameters of knowledge transmission to unprecedented degrees. One of the disconcerting side-effects of, for instance, teaching on Zoom was the radical dissolution of the boundary separating professional and private spaces, juxtaposing images of the instructor's apartment with various impressions of student dorms and other semi- or non-professional spaces. This de-territorialization of the educational space did not perform the interruption of myth but rested on its own mythology, proclaiming that even in the face of a global pandemic the endeavor of American college education can continue in an uninterrupted, perhaps even enhanced fashion. In this sense, the decreed virtualization of pedagogy did not pose a threat to the common place but was propelled by the myth that we can have our common place anywhere. What this ideology eclipses is of course the revolutionary potential of embodied education, which is also what gives the act of a strike its political weight: the assembly of bodies in the same place, the spacing of bodies along the limit of interruption.

### **The Clearing**

The limit of interruption that so essentially determines the endeavor of humanist education has a history that chronicles its articulation in pedagogical discourse. Within the German-speaking tradition, it was probably Friedrich Nietzsche who made the most vehement plea for the institutional unmooring of education. He did so in his 1872 lectures "Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten" ("On the Future of Our Educational Institutions"), held at the Basel city museum. The lectures are remarkable not just for their content but their rhetorical presentation: instead of a rigid academic argument, Nietzsche exhibits a literary scene that mobilizes the powers of narrative and figuration. These devices do not serve the purpose of mere embellishment but are necessary to secure the speaker's role as that of someone who can critique the infrastructure of educational institutions from the very place of their interruption.

This interruption takes the form of an outing to a clearing in the forest. Nietzsche invokes a strange encounter from his salad days in the German Gymnasium. During a fraternity excursion, he and a close friend resolved to visit a specific clearing in a forest near the Rhine River, where, as high school students, they had founded a para-academic club of sorts, whose activities and discussions had proved formative for their intellectual development. Nietzsche describes the circumstances in some detail:

We decided to form a small club with a few schoolmates, an organization imposing certain set obligations on our literary and artistic aspirations. To put it more simply, every one of us would pledge to submit something every month, whether a poem, an essay, an architectural plan, or a piece of music; every other member would offer candid, friendly criticism. We thought that this mutual oversight would both stimulate our drive for self-cultivation and keep it within proper limits. And our plan was a success, so much so that, ever since, we could only think back on the time and place where the idea came to us with a certain grateful, even solemn feeling of respect. (*Anti-Education* 5)

Wir beschlossen damals eine kleine Vereinigung von wenig Kameraden zu stiften, mit der Absicht, für unsere produktiven Neigungen in Kunst und Litteratur eine feste und verpflichtende Organisation zu finden; d.h. schlichter ausgedrückt: es mußte sich ein Jeder von uns verbindlich machen, von Monat zu Monat ein eignes Produkt, sei es eine Dichtung oder eine Abhandlung oder ein architektonischer Entwurf oder eine musikalische Produktion, einzusenden, über welches Produkt nun ein Jeder der Anderen mit der unbegrenzten Offenheit freundschaftlicher Kritik zu richten befugt war. So glaubten wir unsere Bildungstriebe durch gegenseitiges Überwachen eben so zu reizen, als im Zaume zu halten: und wirklich war auch der Erfolg der Art, daß wir immer eine dankbare, ja feierliche Empfindung für jenen Moment und jenen Ort zurückbehalten mußten, die uns jenen Einfall eingegeben hatten. (“Ueber die Zukunft” 653–54)

As Damion Searls’ rendition diminishes much of the original’s complexity, my discussion is oriented by Nietzsche’s German. What the philosopher describes here is the invention of disseminar: a type of learning that happens precisely after the pupils involved have bursted out of class. That’s not to say, however, that this newly established rogue seminar is entirely devoid of an institutional structure. On the contrary, Nietzsche explicitly addresses its “firm and obliging organization” (“eine feste und verpflichtende Organisation”). The binding obligation undergirding this organization lies in an ethics of submission: one submits by agreeing to submit the products of one’s intellectual labor—a drawing, a composition, a poem, or a treatise—in order to subject them to the “unlimited openness of friendly critique” (“unbegrenzten Offenheit freundschaftlicher Kritik”) with which the rest of the club’s members were authorized to pass their judgment (“zu richten befugt”). This structure of reciprocal submission and friendly critique serves the double purpose of stimulating as well as curbing the pupil’s educational drive (“unsere Bildungstriebe . . . eben so zu reizen, als im Zaume zu halten”)—a goal that is achieved through mutual surveillance (“durch gegenseitiges Überwachen”).



Nietzsche's vision adds a dystopian undertone to Springsteen's rock'n'roll fantasy of pedagogical liberation. He leaves no doubt about the fact that the interruption of education and its displacement into the clearing in the forest is no remedy against institutional coercion. As a matter of fact, his disseminar only disseminates itself into the institution's outside in order to found a new type of institution, equipped with mechanisms of compulsion and its own surveillance infrastructure. Yet it differs from the type of school left behind in that this structure is self-imposed and democratically organized, such that the positions of judge and appraisee shift in accordance with the cyclic logic of monthly rotation. Acts of judgment are meant to take place in the spirit of unlimited openness and friendship. The lack of limitation, in turn, is contrasted by the tight rein ("Zaume") placed on the pupils' educational drive. This drive is not simply to be liberated, but both stimulated and bridled according to a fine dialectics of institutional coercion. The openness of critique thus *gives way* to the domitability of an educational drive that can only flourish under the exposure to a regulatory kind of violence.

Nietzsche calls his disseminar a success and states that he has retained a "celebratory feeling" ("feierliche Empfindung") for the particular time and place ("jenen Moment und jenen Ort") that led to the founding of his rogue institution. Highlighting the spatio-temporal circumstances of its coming-into-being is to underscore the interruptive nature of disseminar, which can only come about through a de-territorialization of the educational precinct whose time is necessarily out of joint. That Nietzsche starts his lectures by disseminating a memory of disseminar creates an implicit tension to the title of his project wherein he conjures "The Future of Our Educational Institutions." If there is a model for this future, he finds it in the memory of the rogue seminar's particular time and place, whose phantasmatic coordinates circumscribe the clearing in the forest. This clearing seemingly harbors a memory of the future, transpiring in the unlimited openness in which education can be critiqued and an alternative institutional landscape imagined.

Nietzsche's central conviction that "[t]here *are* no true educational institutions" (Anti-Education 57; Ueber die Zukunft 717; "Also es giebt keine Bildungsanstalten!") therefore finds its counterpoint in the memory of the rogue organization that proffers the lost reality of the kind of education whose future the philosopher envisions. At a later point, he states:

The club was what had truly borne fruit—it had supplied the framework for our quest for education, and we had sketched our formal schooling into it. (*Anti-Education* 12)

[E]r war uns nicht etwa nur ein Supplement für unsre Gymnasialstudien gewesen sondern geradezu die eigentliche fruchtbringende Gesellschaft, in deren Rahmen wir auch unser Gymnasium mit hineingezeichnet hatten, als ein einzelnes Mittel im Dienste unseres allgemeinen Strebens nach Bildung. (“Ueber die Zukunft” 663)

Disseminar, inasmuch as it guides Nietzsche’s thinking on education, does not merely oppose the pre-given institutions of formal schooling. The metaphorical clearing is so open and wide that it allows for the integration of Nietzsche’s *Gymnasialstudien*, namely as “a single means in the service of our general striving for education” (“einzelnes Mittel im Dienste unseres allgemeinen Strebens nach Bildung”).

Having, years later, returned to the clearing as the club’s primal scene, Nietzsche and his friend encounter a new version of disseminar. They enter a dialogue with a philosopher and his apprentice, who happen to occupy the clearing the same day of Nietzsche’s fraternity excursion. The ensuing conversation between Nietzsche, his schoolmate, and the philosophical couple makes up the bulk of Nietzsche’s five lectures, the sixth and last of which remained unwritten. The critique of education Nietzsche delivers at the Basel city museum is therefore framed by two scenes in the clearing: the founding of the fabled club and the encounter with a philosophical duo during a commemorative excursion. Club and encounter form two moments of disseminar and allow for a critical interruption of the prevalent educational landscape and its discursive commerce. It would be a mistake, however, to view the two scenes as mere repetitions of one another. As a matter of fact, their difference speaks to an underlying problem with disseminar whose presence Nietzsche only implicitly acknowledges. This problem pertains to the shape of authority.

The rogue seminar proffered the one educational enterprise that had “truly borne fruit.” Part of its stated success was owed to the creation of a flat hierarchy which displaced the position of the traditional schoolmaster with a rotating system of mutual surveillance and judgment. In accordance with this system, the substance of authority does not vanish but becomes democratized in the sense that a given club member routinely switches out of the position of appraisee in order to occupy the place of judge and critic. Authority becomes the structural effect of an occupiable subject-position rather than the inherent quality of a given subjectivity. This model is, however, not repeated

once the philosopher appears in the clearing. The encounter with the thinker and his apprentice of which Nietzsche reports introduces a different understanding of authority: while it does not resurrect the traditional schoolmaster, it assigns considerable discursive power to a single subject whose speech guides the entire discursive economy of Nietzsche's reflections. "The old philosopher is clearly the main figure," Reitter and Wellmon (xvii) comment in their introduction to Nietzsche's text.

Recalling a term that Todd McGowan borrows from Slavoj Žižek, the philosophical presence dominating Nietzsche's lectures could be viewed as an *ur*-image of the "anal father of enjoyment" (46). McGowan introduces this term within an assessment of the modern disappearance of authority according to which the paternal position has been transformed from traditional paternal dominance into a quasi-emancipatory image of leveled authority. One trait of this new father figure is precisely his ubiquity: "In contrast to the old symbolic father (who was an absent ruler and the ruler over a world of absence), the new father is overly present in our lives" (46). While the symbolic authority of the Oedipal father was premised upon distance and asymmetry, the anal father of enjoyment deliberately destroys this incline of authority, thus relinquishing his sway over his subjects. However, what on the surface seems like a democratization of authority turns out to uphold and even to exacerbate political asymmetries: "Though the anal father represents a leveling of paternal authority, he also represents an increase in its power. In this sense, we should view this new father in radically ambivalent terms: he is more democratic and yet more powerful than the traditional father (because the authority that we can't recognize as authority is always more powerful than the openly authoritative authority)" (47).

The project of disseminar thus discloses its political vulnerability. If the interruptive procession of the rogue educational project consists in tracing a line of flight that leads us outside the given educational landscape—perhaps into a clearing in the forest—this outside must, in consequence, contend with a certain political vacuum. If education should continue, albeit in a transformed fashion, the proponents of disseminar must impose on themselves new institutional structures and consent to a new distribution of authority. The two scenarios Nietzsche offers stand in stark contrast. On the one hand, the memory of the fabled club, whose establishment guides his understanding of educational critique, mirrors the very structure of the educational institutions it had left behind in that it institutes a coercive apparatus

of binding obligation, mutual surveillance, and decisive judgment, thereby preserving the position of the symbolic father. On the other, the encounter with the philosopher and his apprentice abrogates this coercive infrastructure in that it conjures the image of the new father of anal enjoyment whose overbearing presence in the clearing implicitly dominates the discursive economy of Nietzsche's five lectures. Disseminar's chance is therefore also its danger: its bursting away from authority encounters the alternative between its perverted preservation and its fortification under a different guise.

### Columbus, MO

Beside the genealogies of educational philosophy, an important place for the expression of disseminar are narratives of education, especially to the extent that they take the form of novels of the institution (*Institutionenromane*). These novels, to follow Rüdiger Campe's reasoning, cover "a more or less extensive stretch of time in which the protagonist enters an institutional space, or condition of existence. By the time the narrative has reached its conclusion, the protagonist has either left the institutional space, or he has disappeared and died in it" (215). The novel of the institution pertains to the entire landscape of modern institutions, and examples in which Campe is interested include Kafka's bureaucratic netherworlds as well as the medicinal institutional context of the sanatorium in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. A particular emphasis, however, must lie on the educational institution, not least because the novel of the institution at once posits the heir and a stated counterprogram to the classic bildungsroman tradition. This tradition had been interested in education as the project of individual development that spans an entire biography. The novel of the institution breaks this development up into episodes whose respective value lies in narrativizing the mechanisms of institutional subjectification. A place of particular interest for these types of narratives is the boarding school, which forms a topos explored with perlustrating attentiveness during the first decades of the twentieth century, especially in the German-speaking tradition—one need only recall names such as Hermann Hesse, Robert Musil, or Robert Walser.

Within the tradition of American letters, institutions of higher education tend to take precedence over secondary educational contexts, and in the course of the unfolding twentieth century the so-called "campus novel" consolidated itself as a legitimate offshoot of the institutional novel, circumscribing a genre that brings together writers as

diverse as Randall Jarrell, Philip Roth, and Donna Tartt. One name pertaining to this genre belongs to author John Edward Williams, an English professor at the University of Denver, who published four novels between the years of 1948 and 1972. His third novel is called *Stoner*, and it forms something one could term the *total* novel of the institution, as it challenges Campe's typology in interesting ways. If Campe envisions the *Institutionenroman* to present us with one episode within an individual life whose subject is turned into an institutional fact, *Stoner* widens this episodic character into the full scope of the life of its eponymous protagonist, who spends his entire biography as subject to a single educational institution: the University of Missouri at Columbia.

The novel commences:

William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of nineteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. (3)

In this opening passage, Stoner's entire biography is made an institutional fact. While it does not mention his biological birth, it frames his existence by mentioning his entry into the University of Missouri in 1910 and his death in 1956, at a time when he was still professionally active. His birth is effectively replaced by his matriculation, which started an institutional trajectory that spans his college years, his time as a Ph.D. student and graduate lecturer, and finally his tenure as a faculty member in the English department, where he will work until he perishes.

Because Stoner's life is so thoroughly determined by one and the same institutional apparatus, the question concerning dissemination poses itself with great urgency in his case. If dissemination names the structural necessity to move outside the institutional confines of education, thereby interrupting its regimes of subjectification, this necessity ought to express itself with some vehemence regarding a life whose entire development is not only framed but totally determined by the same institution. The question arises whether Stoner, in his surrounding world, can find and occupy the improbable space, whether it takes the form of a clearing in the woods or something else, that would grant the possibility of dissemination. How do you burst out of school if your entire life, from metaphorical birth to eventual death, is contained in a classroom?

Stoner shares one such improbable space “outside” that allows for the interruption of the institutional apparatus with his daughter Grace, whose disengaged mother Edith, Stoner’s wife, leaves the child-rearing duties to her husband for the first few years after Grace’s birth. Stoner experiences his exposure to the daughter not merely as a familial encounter motivated by parental obligation, but as an educational opportunity that allows him to establish a rogue seminar beyond the confines of his profession. “Sometimes,” we read,

Grace played with neighbor children, but more often she sat with her father in his large study and watched him as he graded papers, or read, or wrote. She spoke to him, and they conversed—so quietly and seriously that William Stoner was moved by a tenderness that he never foresaw. Grace drew awkward and charming pictures on sheets of yellow paper and presented them solemnly to her father, or she read aloud to him from her first-grade reader. At night, when Stoner put her to bed and returned to his study, he was aware of her absence from his room and was comforted by the knowledge that she slept securely above him. In ways of which he was barely conscious he started her education, and he watched with amazement and love as she grew before him and as her face began to show the intelligence that worked within her. (111)

In this scene, Grace is able to offer her father a gift usually only books can give him: language. Rather than a helpless child in need of rearing, she is presented as a thoughtful interlocutor able to “speak” and “converse” with considerable seriousness. This dialogic pleasure stands in contrast to the various silences that tend to structure Stoner’s lifeworld, as neither the relationship between his own parents, nor his relationship to them, nor the one he now entertains with his wife are marked by a reliable faith in language.

As Stoner pursues his academic duties, the unfolding scene in his study is one of shared intellectual labor: while the professor grades, reads, and writes, his daughter draws pictures or reads aloud. An educational event occurs whose place decidedly lies beyond the institutional scope of Stoner’s professional existence when he watches “with amazement and love” the start of Grace’s “education,” as she expresses “the intelligence that worked within her.” The caesura placed onto his institutional being by his exposure to Grace and her language allows him to redefine his pedagogical self-understanding, so much so that “he began to know how centrally important Grace had become to his existence, and he began to understand that it might be possible for him to become a good teacher” (112). Disseminar here repeats the structure Nietzsche had in mind when stating that

formal institutional education becomes just “one means in the service of our general striving for education.” Stoner too manages to sketch his institutional role as a teacher into the wider pedagogical endeavor he defines through the dialogic pleasure experienced by witnessing the daughter’s burgeoning intelligence.

The growing marital conflicts between Stoner and Edith will cause Grace to become estranged from her father, squandering the promising space of their disseminar. In the ensuing period of solitude and lack of orientation, another clearing opens up, this time between Stoner and a graduate instructor named Katherine Driscoll. Her presence makes itself felt at a point when Stoner’s career prospects have reached a dead-end after he had lost control of a departmental power struggle from which his intellectual enemies arose victoriously. Henceforth condemned exclusively to teach introductory courses, Stoner yearns for intellectual stimulation, which he can no longer receive from Grace, nor can he find it at work. In this moment of existential embattlement, he forms an intense connection to Katherine, who loosely knew Stoner from auditing one of his previous courses, and who now reappears to ask him for feedback on her dissertation manuscript. Reading her work elates him: “My God, he said to himself in a kind of wonder; and his fingers trembled with excitement as he turned the pages” (185). This excitement soon grows into a broader intellectual collaboration between the two, finally culminating in the development of romantic relations. This overlap of romantic desire and a shared will to knowledge characterizes their disseminar, as Stoner “was preparing for his visits to her with the same diligence that he prepared for lectures” (190).

His visits with Katherine revive within Stoner the dialogic pleasure he had first experienced with Grace: “Like all lovers, they spoke much of themselves, as if they might thereby understand the world which made them possible” (196). The sentence designates their intimate encounters to be pedagogical in nature as they yield a certain type of intellectual access. The medium of this pedagogy is language, and its object of reflection is “the world,” which simultaneously figures as their condition of possibility—that “which made them possible.” The sentence thus highlights the complex relationship between disseminar and the world it has supposedly left behind. While the lovers seek isolation from the world, they still generate a type of knowledge about it, albeit one that is refracted by the isolated and highly intimate space of disseminar: “[T]hey speak much of themselves, as if they might thereby understand the world.” The syntagm “as if” exposes the

knowledge generated about the world as fictitious, and it underscores what I would like to call the *idiomatic danger* to which disseminar can fall prey. For while the lovers might seem to intellectualize “the world,” their true object of inquiry and the target of their discursive pleasure lies in themselves (“they spoke much of themselves”). Disseminar is therefore in danger of closing in on its own intimacy, losing itself in an esoteric space within which the only possible dialogue relies in a conversation about disseminar’s intimacy and its desiring subjects.

Consequently, disseminar’s relation to “the world” becomes a negative one, according to which the world is no longer sought to be understood but debunked and renounced:

Then they would make love, and lie quietly for a while, and return to their studies, as if their love and learning were one process.

That was one of the oddities of what they called “given opinion” that they learned that summer. They had been brought up in a tradition that told them in one way or another that the life of the mind and the life of the senses were separate and, indeed, inimical; they had believed, without ever having really thought about it, that one had to be chosen at some expense of the other. That the one could intensify the other had never occurred to them; and since the embodiment came before the recognition of the truth, it seemed a discovery that belonged to them alone. They began to collect these oddities of “given opinion,” and they hoarded them as if they were treasures; it helped to isolate them from the world that would give them these opinions, and it helped draw them together in a small but moving way. (199)

The world is defined as the place of “given opinion,” the *doxa* whose commerce makes up the discourse of common sense. Disseminar opposes this discursive field by generating an esoteric type of knowledge that stands at odds with the prescripts of *doxa*. While the aforementioned passage still understands the world as the place that makes the lovers possible, this sense of rootedness is now forfeited as the world marks the very precinct from which the couple seeks “to isolate” itself. All that remains from the world are the rejected oddities of given opinion that are hoarded “as if they were treasures.” These treasures serve as the last vestiges of a discursive traffic between disseminar’s particular dialogic pleasure and the general communicative context of the world. With each rejected given opinion, disseminar encapsulates itself more thoroughly within the shell of its highly idiomatic discursive regime.

In the final analysis, Stoner’s sapiophilic adventure cannot last. As his rogue seminar implodes, he is forced to reinscribe his existence



according to the registers of “given opinion.” The fallout of his escape highlights the idiomatic danger threatening the movement of disseminar, which follows a tendency toward esoteric dialogue and cultish isolation. Roughly a decade after the publication of *Stoner*, French literary theorist Roland Barthes conceptualized the seminar in a text titled “Au séminaire,” which has been translated as “To the Seminar”—in the sense of an address or an ode to something or someone—but which Emily Apter has proposed to read as the wistful exclamation “O seminar!” (101). Central to Barthes’ view of the seminar are both the transferential dimension manifest in *Stoner* as well as the dialectic between idiomatic knowledge and common sense. “In the seminar,” Barthes defines, “all teaching is foreclosed: no knowledge is transmitted (but a knowledge can be created), no discourse is sustained (but a text is sought): teaching is *disappointed*” (337). Put another way, the seminar invents its discourse rather than regurgitating preconceived notions, what John Williams would call “the oddities of ‘given opinion.’” This results in educational “disappointment” precisely to the extent that the seminar severs itself from the transmission of reliable forms of knowledge for the sake of teaching the as-of-yet-unknown. As a radical consequence of this conception, the rogue seminar produces a kind of knowledge that is entirely unintelligible to anyone who has not been part of the event of teaching. Knowledge totally severed from “the world.”

Toward the end of the song “No Surrender,” Springsteen alarmingly declares that “The walls of my room are closing in / There’s a war outside still raging.” The verses poignantly express the dialectic of disseminar: while it seeks to burst away, into the institutional outside, it instantaneously creates a new interior whose walls start closing in. With an eye to Nietzsche, I have shown that this interior demands to be regulated and dominated, thus giving rise to new forms of authority and new distributions of power. With a focus on John Williams, I have demonstrated the isolating quality of this intimate space, which detaches itself from the world of common sense in such extreme ways that its dialogic economy risks a total collapse into the esoteric abyss of unintelligible idiomaticity. In order to avoid these political and idiomatic dangers, disseminar must interrupt even its own limit of interruption and seek the outside not only of pre-given forms of institutionality but of its own walls as they start closing in.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>I dedicate this piece to my interdisciplinary honors seminar “What Was the University?” (Spring 2022) and extend my sincere appreciation to Emily Trujillo for providing lucid feedback and insightful commentary.

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