**Review Essay**

**Public Engagement and the Literary Academy**

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*The Word on the Street: Linking the Academy and the Common Reader*  
Harvey Teres  
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**The Word on the Street: Linking the Academy and the Common Reader** begins in *medias res* by immediately addressing, rather than simply rehearsing, “the national crisis of legitimacy for the humanities, evidenced by questions about their relevance in the current economic downturn and an increasingly technology- and corporate-driven economy, shrinking endowments, recalcitrant legislatures, and diminishing budgets and student enrollments” (p. 2). Refreshingly, for author Harvey Teres, civic engagement is not a trendy solution that conveniently adresses a recently ramped up problem. Rather, his “main argument is that we need publicly engaged scholarship for reasons that are internal to the humanities and literary studies in particular” (p. 2).

The introduction clearly summarizes how the book seeks to move literature departments beyond the “real” problems they currently face:

*The Word on the Street* dissects the problem of a literary academy that has been too reluctant to engage with the public outside the classroom, offers examples of alternatives from the past, and opens a road to the future of publicly engaged scholarship for reasons that are internal to the humanities and literary studies in particular” (p. 2).

For Teres, who is an associate professor of English at Syracuse University, academia’s mounting reluctance to seriously contend with issues of aesthetics is directly related to literature departments’ increasing detachment from common readers:

Regrettably, within the academy, literature and art have become politicized in a way that has often viewed aesthetics as just another domain plagued by the pernicious effects of power and authority, while the possible relation between aesthetic experience and democracy is widely neglected…

Literary theory has contributed enormously to the range of questions we ask about literature and culture, but because of institutional and professional constraints, it has neither established meaningful contact with the broader public and the very constituencies whose interests it often claims to represent nor provided much perspective on how we might contribute to the public conversation about the arts and the quality of the cultures and discourses we share. The time is ripe to test the insights of literary theory by expanding our purview not just conceptually but practically. This requires critics who are read by the average citizen, but the migration of so many critics and intellectuals from the public to the academy over the past generations has meant fewer efforts to make contact with common readers who do not happen to take their courses or read their books. (pp. 1-2)

According to Teres, this newly created distance between literary scholars and common readers has not only hurt the field of literary studies, but it has also had a profound effect on American society as a whole:

Despite significant changes since midcentury in American critical culture (the culture that flows from the serious review of books, ideas, and the arts), it continues to attract only a small minority of Americans, a circumstance widely considered inevitable and thus acceptable. However productive this culture has been, American society has not made significant progress toward realizing either Emerson’s hope, expressed in “The American Scholar,” that its “delegated intellects” might become “Man Thinking” and also Dewey’s vision of a cultural democracy. (p. 2)

As evidence to support his claim of the loss of critical culture among the average citizen, Teres cites
worrying statistics about literacy rates as well as a rate of decline in literary reading (pp. 11-12).

*The Word on the Street* is divided into three parts: Part 1: The Academy and the Public; Part 2: Whence Beauty?; and Part 3: Aesthetics “In the Raw.” The study begins as Teres mourns the loss of the kind of dialogue necessary for “democracy” to be “fully realized” due to the fact that literature and cultural criticism “has been largely contained within academic culture” since the 1960s (pp. 19-20). Consequently, Teres ends his first chapter with a call for academics to leave their ivory tower retreats:

Any significant revitalization of critical culture through processes of cultural democratization will need to extend the critical work of these public intellectuals to encompass a greater portion of the general public they now serve well but incompletely. Key to this endeavor would be a general reorientation of the academic humanities so that a place is made for publicly engaged scholarship, by which I mean an active, reciprocal relationship with nonacademic constituencies that generates new knowledge. Such reorientation would of course accompany traditional outreach through inclusive programming, inviting community members onto campus, and so on. It would necessarily entail a change in academic culture so that professors interested in engaging with the public would actually be encouraged to do so by a revamped tenure and rewards system that recognizes the value of such work. Even were a small proportion of the humanities professoriat [sic] to choose such a path, it would mean many thousands of highly trained experts newly involved in shaping an improved, critical cultural conversation. This would be an enormous contribution to the public life of the nation. (pp. 31-32)

Unfortunately, while Teres repeats phrases like “active, reciprocal relationship” throughout the book, he never shows us a truly reciprocal model of public engagement. Moreover, at one point in his chapter on “Revitalizing Literary Studies,” Teres advances the following suggestion after lauding Imagining America’s crucial Tenure Team Initiative:

One obvious way to [encourage public scholarship by encouraging college and universities to revise their tenure and promotion policies] would be to embrace and encourage the many academics that now serve at least in part in the capacity of public intellectual; that is, they address the common reader on issues of public concern through print or electronic media. Unfortunately, there are some within Imagining America who consider the vital contributions of public intellectuals past and present to be elitist in nature because, by talking at the public rather than with the public, they fail to create a sustained reciprocal relationship with their audience. This is a terribly provincial and self-limiting understanding of public intellectuals and what they have brought to the public conversation since Socrates. It has emphatically not been unidirectional communication (unless, of course, the state or some other entity shuts the conversation down) but has, to the contrary, been an invitation and at times a challenge to engage in further thought and dialogue, both public and private, without any particular terminal point. To characterize the role of public intellectuals as essentially unilateral is gravely to misunderstand the process by which ideas and judgments are distributed among readers and either accepted or rejected by them. (p. 53)

But even though Teres insinuates that his ideal version of a “public intellectual” does not talk “at” the public, in fact, the few models of public engagement offered in the book do not clarify exactly how the professoriate gains new insights into literature through reciprocal interactions with the common reader.

Moreover, several passages suggest that the true crisis in the humanities at the moment is that the common reader is (mis)reading texts due to the lack of the public intellectuals’ irreplaceable guidance. For example, in summarizing his chapter examining “One City, One Book” campaigns—“When Everyone Misread the Same Book”—Teres muses:

But what have such campaigns done for “aesthetic literacy,” or the ability to recognize and respond to artistic forms and strategies that make literature something other than a social document? My time in the field investigating the local CNY Reads campaign for *The Grapes of Wrath* in central New York revealed a troubling absence of concern for the pleasures of the text or, indeed, for any of the key issues that have engaged discerning readers of Steinbeck’s novel since its publication in 1939. Wherever I went—a gala kickoff ceremony, a high school class, a lecture on censorship, a performance by a Steinbeck impersonator—I was struck by the uniform consideration of the novel’s dissident and progressive outlook regarding class, gender, power, and social justice and by an equally uniform neglect of fundamental matters pertaining to craft and aesthetic experience. These matters, not surprisingly, have concerned some of our best critics since the novel’s publication—Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, Harold Bloom—and I consider what is lost when common readers are not exposed to the judgments of critics so that they in turn may weigh in and thereby participate in conversations that are vital to the maintenance of discerning, critical citizens. (p. 6)

When coming across passages such as this, I can-
not help but think that Teres’s study would benefit much from taking his notion of “reciprocity” more seriously as he carefully considers what the professoriate could gain from truly investigating popular responses to Steinbeck’s novel. Notably, “wherever” Teres went he repeatedly encountered the same readings of Steinbeck. When faced with such overwhelming consensus, it would behoove any scholar to consider the significance of these similarities, rather than conclude that “everyone is misreading the same book.” After all, engaging common readers in honestly reciprocal conversations would be more in line with the spirit of earlier germinal studies like Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance (1991)—a text Teres repeatedly cites as an inspiration for his own analysis.

Harvey Teres took the time to talk to what he calls common readers, and his chapter does draw upon the results of surveys he conducted with some of the readers of The Grapes of Wrath. But rather than allow the data to inspire an inquisitive analysis of some of the common readers’ responses, Teres continually expresses his dismay that “the particular ‘literariness’ of the novel was not of crucial concern” (p. 120). Here, I cannot help but juxtapose Teres’s experiences with the experiences of scholars (including myself) who regularly participate in literary organizations such as the Dickens Project and the Jane Austen Society of North America. While academics do most of the speaking at events like the Dickens Universe (aka the “Dickens Camp” featured in a recent issue of The New Yorker), and the annual general meetings sponsored by the Jane Austen Society of North America, the agendas, particularly of the latter organization, are dictated by the assumption that common readers and academics are reading classic literature on equal terms. Because my own readings of the novels of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen have been profoundly influenced by the spirit of reciprocity that these organizations are built upon, I believe it is vital that humanities scholars do more than talk to the public when participating in programs that bring together academic and non-academic readers of a particular text. The quantitative data on readers’ responses to The Grapes of Wrath that Teres collected during the campaign is an important vehicle through which the public was able to speak back to the academy—and it is important that the public have a say in learning objectives of programs that institutions of literary authority design for their benefit.

The subsequent chapter—“Reading Simic in Syracuse”—discusses another “One City, One Book” campaign, but here the focus is on the poetry of Charles Simic. Teres details how, inspired by a poetry project that he read about in Joan Rubin’s Songs of Ourselves, he and his students offered passers-by at a local mall the opportunity to create poems in magnets on refrigerators (pp. 133-134). Teres provides readers valuable insights into the project by quoting from some of his students’ reflection papers. He also describes how his students thoughtfully discussed aesthetics while working as a group to judge the winners of the poetry contests they organized. Teres’s summary of the evaluation session provides a lucid example of how theoretical notions of aesthetics can be effectively translated to students by engaging with the public:

Five of the nine students who helped put on the mall event served on the committee to select the best poems. We met for a couple hours one evening at my home, and our conversations about the poetry were among the most insightful and useful of the entire semester from a pedagogical perspective. Faced with a job that needed doing, whatever reluctance the students may have had about making value judgments—due to either their “elite” status or their uncertainty about the powers of discrimination—was transformed from abstract and paralyzing anxiety into acts of judgment that combined awareness of skill with awareness of possible bias. Our conversations were most often centered around such things as diction, rhythm, sound, sense, and syntax (which, by the way, in classroom settings rarely elicit the kind of focused attention they did here), but our backgrounds and values sometimes insinuated themselves into our deliberations and occasionally affected our judgment. What is most important is that students learned to make decisions and live with them. (p. 140)

This passage highlights one of the book’s major strengths: it provides a reproducible model of public engagement for literary scholars who have not attempted such feats in the past. Teres aptly summarizes the major twentieth-century aesthetic debates in literary studies as he traces how the decline in the field’s serious consideration of aesthetics came about. The book’s emphasis on aesthetics makes it accessible to literary scholars who may not be familiar with the literature and language of community engaged. By emphasizing how the poetry project provided a unique opportunity to teach students abstract concepts, Teres encourages other literary scholars to explore similar community-based learning projects in their own classes.

Of course, those who are well versed in the literature of civic engagement will likely find much wanting in this particular text. Even a cursory glance at the notes for this book shows that Teres is not drawing heavily from traditional, cross-disciplinary studies of community-based scholarship. As a result, there are moments in the text when the author makes grand statements that are not supported with any kind of...
reference to recent studies on the subject. For example, he offers the following conjecture about composition teaching and learning strategies:

Thus, many in the field of composition have jettisoned the teaching of writing as an art or craft and chosen instead to teach theoretical strategies, political and ideological awareness, and respect for (though, crucially, not mastery of) modes of writing that are alternatives to Standard English. Although such strategies no doubt impart useful knowledge, the results have not been encouraging. Nowhere—certainly not at my institution—has convincing evidence shown this approach to result in a discernible, systematic improvement in the quality of writing. To the contrary the approach has more often contributed to the decline in writing skills attested to by a growing consensus of educators. (p. 96)

Despite these deficiencies—a public engagement model in which genuine reciprocity is undervalued and the community voice is virtually absent—the book is a useful resource for literary scholars interested in considering a detailed example of how one theoretical issue (the issue of aesthetics) is put in a different light when considered with respect to the common reader. The Word on the Street, therefore, is likely to add to the fold of community-based scholarship as it attracts new literary scholars to the ever-growing field of public engagement.

References


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