
Greenblatt
Learning to Curse

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with a new introduction by the author

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"Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century," in *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 561–580.

"Marlowe, Marx, and Anti-Semitism," in *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), pp. 291–307.

"Filthy Rites," in *Daedalus* 111 (1982), pp. 1–16.

"The Cultivation of Anxiety: King Lear and His Heirs," *Raritan* 2 (1982), pp. 92–124.

"Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre, and the Representation of Rebellion," in *Representations* 1 (1983), pp. 1–29.

"Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture," in *Literary Theory/ Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 210–224.

"Towards a Poetics of Culture," in *Southern Review* 20 (1987), pp. 3–15. A slightly different version of this essay appears as "Capitalist Culture and the Circulatory System," in *The Aims of*

Representation: Subject/Text/History, ed. Murray Krieger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 257–273.

"Resonance and Wonder," in *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 43 (1990), pp. 11–34. Also in *Literary Theory Today*, ed. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 74–90.

Preface to the Routledge Classics Edition

In the introduction I originally wrote for this collection of essays, I recounted some of the particular circumstances in my upbringing and education that condition my own characteristic perceptions, set the questions I typically ask of the world, and help shape (before I even begin to work) the sentences I am likely to generate. These autobiographical reflections were meant to serve in lieu of something about the specific occasions that called forth each of the pieces—a conference here, a lecture invitation there, the welcome opportunity to step forward and vent my folly, as Touchstone mockingly says, in the pages of one journal or another. Having ducked the opportunity to describe these occasions once, it is probably ridiculous to embrace it now, but I will venture briefly to comment on a few of these pieces, since their originating circumstances are now all far enough in the past to make them seem at once emblematic and somewhat curious.

The title essay, "Learning to Curse," owes its existence to an invitation to participate in a conference held in 1975 at UCLA on

"First Images of America." My own connection to the subject was rather tenuous: in a book, based on my dissertation, on Sir Walter Ralegh, I had included a discussion of his voyages to Guiana. The pages must have caught the attention of the conference organizer, the prodigiously energetic director of UCLA's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Fredi Chiappelli. A Florentine whose blend of worldliness and entrepreneurial cunning earned him the wryly affectionate nickname "Machiapelli," he had the foresight to anticipate, some twenty years before the event, that the quincentenery of Columbus's first voyage would summon up unusual scholarly efforts, and he embarked on a plan that called for the translation of all of Columbus' extant writings; research on his intellectual and cultural contexts; an attempt, through an exhibition of landscape paintings of Italy, Greece, Spain, and the Caribbean, to reconstruct his visual world; and a sustained focus on the great moment of the fateful encounter. "First Images of America" was Chiappelli's initial salvo, and it was done in characteristic style: a grand international event, with dozens of papers in an array of languages, exhibitions, receptions, banquets, and an intense sense, still perhaps at least dimly conveyed by the two massive volumes of published conference papers, that something very important was happening.

Something important, in any case, was happening for me. I had, in the course of writing my paper, discovered the fascination of the great collections of travel accounts assembled by Hakluyt, Purchas, and Ramusio, a fascination that determined much of the subsequent work on which I embarked for decades afterward. The fascination was not unmixed with anger and disgust, for the accounts are often quite horrible, but a deep inner disturbance has its uses. I could not stop reading these narratives: they haunted my dreams, as well as my waking hours, and I discovered, not for the last time, that what began as background reading, was jostling its way to the foreground. At the start, I

wanted to know why in *The Tempest* Caliban is said to have no language at all, until Prospero and his daughter teach him to speak. The question remained central for me, but the material I began to assemble in order to construct an answer had a disturbing life of its own.

That life, I grasped, is inseparable from the imagination. That is, I did not see before me a work of art, on the one hand, and a set of raw materials, on the other. *The Tempest*, to be sure, is a stupendous literary achievement, but the most homely documents assembled by Hakluyt are not unshaped by fantasy, narrative cunning, and linguistic artfulness. This perception of the artfulness of the ordinary now seems perhaps like an embarrassingly obvious discovery, but the literary training I had received made it less obvious and therefore more exciting. I realized that I could use some of the critical tools I had been sharpening not only on the objects for which they were intended but also on objects that were not usually regarded as worthy of such attention. And I could then attempt to bring together the literary document and the historical document in a new and revealing way.

This attempt is visible in many of these essays, as is a certain obsessiveness. I would repeatedly encounter something, almost always a narrative (though on occasion an image or even, as with Marx's "On the Jewish Question," a philosophical essay), that I literally could not get out of my mind. I could hope to exorcise it only by linking it to a celebrated literary work into which it might nest. The slight air of desperation in all of this is most noticeable, I think, in the essay "Lear's Anxiety," where I labor mightily to bury the story of little Heman Wayland's experience of paternal "love" in the rich soil of *King Lear*. Though I think the essay is something of a failure—and though I still remember the pummeling I took when I presented it as a paper at Johns Hopkins' notoriously pugnacious Tudor and Stuart Club—I remain fond of it, in part because of the intensity of my struggle

to get it right and in part because the implausible conjunction seems to me to cast an eerie light on both texts.

That flickering and uncertain light stands in for any theoretical defense of my practice in several of these essays of conjoining texts that are not causally related, a practice that has been repeatedly and vigorously challenged. A decade after the publication of *Learning to Curse*, Catherine Gallagher and I attempted in *Practicing New Historicism* to respond to the challenge by articulating what we took to be the principles that motivated our criticism. But the articulation of principles in that book cannot adequately account for the spirit in which these essays were written, and not only because of the quality have I called obsessive. For they were written precisely to sidestep or defer questions of theoretical or methodological justification. Neither the Marxism in which I had immersed myself in the early 1970s nor the post-structuralism that followed close on its heels seemed to me to serve my purposes, and I was hardly alone. These essays articulate a shared discontent and a collective experiment.

When the group of Berkeley friends with whom I had been reading and exchanging work for several years decided to start a journal, we sat down to write a programmatic statement, but we could not succeed in producing the document we had told ourselves was appropriate and necessary. In part our inability to do so was because we disagreed with one another – historian arguing with literary critic, anthropologist crossing swords with art historian, and so forth. But in part we could not formulate a coherent methodological program because the whole project of first working out a theory or method and then applying it to historical or aesthetic objects seemed to close off the very avenues each of us most wished to explore. Our interpretive energy depended on a certain risk-taking: bringing together materials that seemed to impinge on one another in unpredictable ways and carefully tracking their interaction. Thus, in place of the statement of purpose that should by rights have introduced

the first issue of our new journal, *Representations*, there was instead the essay "Murdering Peasants."

A final description of the setting for one of the essays collected in *Learning to Curse* will enable me to get at something not adequately conveyed as yet by the terms—fascination, disturbance, obsessiveness, and theoretical discontent—that I have thus far employed. "Resonance and Wonder" originated as the section on visual artifacts (roughly, the last half of the essay) which I wrote for "The Poetics and Politics of Representation," a 1988 conference at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. The occasion, a talk to museum curators and scholars interested in the display of visual artifacts, helps to account for a slightly odd effect: my invocation of the notion of resonance in an analysis of what are, after all, silent objects, objects designed to be looked at. Artifacts displayed in museums, for the most part, do not speak, and if the people who view them do speak—often while listening to the taped voice of a curator—these voices are not ordinarily understood to be essential to the aesthetic experience. "I like your silence," says Shakespeare's Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*, when she first shows Hermione's statue to Leontes, mute with amazement, "It the more shows off/Your wonder" (5.3.31–32).[1]

Of course, books are also silent, but, as a literary scholar with a particular interest in theater, I am more or less constantly aware of the voices that have called language into being and the voices that are called into being by the words on the page. The literal sounds of those voices immediately fade, of course, but they leave complex echoes. I take it that one of the principal tasks—or at least one of principal rewards—of literary study is to enable one to hear and to understand these echoes. I refer, of course, not only to the particular voices that recite or perform a given text, but also to the whole elaborate sound system formed by the language from which a text is fashioned.

The transfer of the notion of resonance from the linguistic to the visual medium was, I grasped, somewhat discordant, but this

discordance seemed to me to have some potential advantages. Specifically, it enabled me to adduce, in discussing the State Jewish Museum in Prague, the murmuring voices that once subtended, interpenetrated, launched, justified, and used the objects that had been torn from their communities. With one significant exception—the eighteen benedictions of the Amidah[2]—Hebrew prayers are spoken, chanted, or muttered aloud. Passages of the Torah read as part of the weekly cycle of prayers are formally chanted, following a system of notation developed in the ninth and tenth centuries. Hence the objects on display in the museum (silver text pointers in the shape of fingers, Torah covers, ark curtains, and the like) were almost always linked to voices. The silencing of those voices—the Nazi deportation and murder of the Jewish communities whose ritual objects they carefully preserved for future ethnographic study—was, in this case, the circumstance that governed the museum display of artifacts that have in themselves (or so I claimed) rather limited power to compel aesthetic admiration but enormous power to call forth ghosts. That is, the artifacts are less about wonder than about resonance.

At the same time, I did not want the governing terms to remain entirely stable. Part of the pleasure of cultural poetics is to become aware of the hidden transfers between apparently discontinuous or even opposed spheres. Wonder is generated by the objects on the walls and in the glass cases of the State Jewish Museum, but it is wonder concentrated not in the artifacts themselves, whose formal qualities are relatively modest, but rather in the historical circumstances that led to their very presence in the deconsecrated rooms. And resonance, ordinarily identified principally with historical circumstances, is found here instead within the objects which encode in their form the voices of the dead.

A strange thing happened to me at the Smithsonian conference that had some bearing on my understanding of the instability of

resonance and wonder. When I got up to speak, I looked out at the audience in the hall and saw with astonishment someone who looked uncannily like my first serious girlfriend, from my university days more than twenty-five years earlier. There was no mistaking it: it was the girl I had once loved, now older of course, but unmistakably she. This circumstance would not by itself have been so surprising—though a quarter of a century had passed since I last saw or spoke to her—had it not been for something else. Some two months earlier my mother had clipped from the newspaper and sent me my ex-girlfriend's obituary. She had died tragically young of breast cancer.

For a moment, in the peculiar heightened intensity in which one begins a talk before a large audience of strangers, I thought I might be going mad. I was almost overcome with wonder. The experience was as close as I will ever get in real life to what Leontes feels when he first sees the statue of Hermione. At the time I was far too unnerved to think of a literary analog. But I understood even then, in the split-second of my disoriented response, that the wonder welling up in me conjoined desire and impossibility.

Then, even as I opened my mouth to speak, my mind raced frantically for some reassurance, some escape route, in effect, from an excess of wonder. I found it quickly enough: it must not have been more than a few seconds before it flashed upon me that my girlfriend had an identical twin sister whom I had only briefly encountered, since she went to a different university. And indeed when the talk was over, this twin came up to introduce herself to me. She had brought some pages of her sister's diary from the time that we were dating, and wanted me to see how sweetly and poignantly she wrote about our relationship. The voice, the handwriting, the turns of phrase, the snatches of conversation recorded from so long before—all conjured up what was now irrevocably past and slowly turned wonder into resonance.

NOTES

1 Note, however, that Paulina continues, "But yet speak; first you, my liege./ Comes it not something near?"

2 The rabbinical commentary on this silence assumes the ordinary vocalization of prayer. Mishnah Brurah: Concerning the prohibition against interrupting the Amidah [Silent Prayer] Siman 104:1. (1) One must not interrupt (2) one's own Silent Prayer. Even if a Jewish king greets him he should not answer. However, (3) with a non-Jewish king, if it is possible to complete the prayer by shortening it before the king reaches him, one should do so, by saying the beginning and ending of each remaining blessing. (4) Or, if it is possible to move to the side of the road and thereby avoid having to interrupt one's prayer [even though this means he moves from his position, which is ordinarily not allowed during the Silent Prayer—LC], one should do so. In any case, one should avoid speaking during one's prayer [i.e., one should use a non-verbal greeting], (5) but if that is impossible one should interrupt by speaking.