

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Though they may already have faded from memory, driven off by more recent and yet more spectacular horrors, for a few short weeks in 1999, the events at Columbine High School mesmerized the nation. There was the live footage of students fleeing in terror across the green, the boy with the bleeding head being dropped from the window, the SWAT teams moving in. There was the discovery of what lay beyond the eye of the camera: fifteen dead, a cache of weapons, a large homemade bomb made with two propane tanks and a gasoline canister, the eventual disclosure of an even more sinister fantasy that involved hijacking a plane and crashing it in New York City.¹ There was the ongoing effort to present fuller and fuller portraits of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two young men who masterminded the slaughter: they were outsiders, video-game enthusiasts, members of the Trench Coat Mafia, neo-Nazis, two boys who couldn't tell their alcohol-fueled dreams from reality, a leader and a follower, a smart kid and a loser, specimens of a middle-class value system in crisis, proof of the need for stricter gun-control laws. And finally, there were the funerals, the white caskets covered in writing from those left behind, the

doves released into the air, and all those inspirational speeches about healing and hope.

Any major social cataclysm produces in its wake two responses. First, there is the search for causes: Why did this happen? Who is to blame? And second, there is an appeal to some greater authority to assist in preventing such upheavals in the future. Following Columbine, fingers were pointed at everyone and everything: inattentive parents, indifferent guidance counselors, insensitive jocks, the entertainment industry, powerful gun lobbyists, the media, the Internet, the military-industrial complex, a president who couldn't keep his pants on.² And then, as one would expect, there were calls both for increased external controls—new laws, regulations, supervisory agencies—and for increased internal controls—educational interventions, moral training, prayer. Surely, more laws, more education, and more religious instruction would bring these violent students back into line.

Despite heightened sensitivity and increased security, however, the schoolyard massacre has proven to be a remarkably durable and recurring social cataclysm. In February 1997, a sixteen-year-old in Bethel, Alaska, entered his high school and murdered the principal and another student. In October 1997, another sixteen-year-old, this one living in Pearl, Mississippi, killed his mother, then went to school and killed two more students. In December 1997, a fourteen-year-old took aim at a prayer circle in West Paducah, Kentucky, killing three. In March 1998, two boys, eleven and thirteen, pulled a fire alarm and gunned down students exiting Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, leaving five dead. And the list goes on with additional shootings over the past five years at high schools in Fayetteville, Tennessee; Springfield, Oregon; Richmond, Virginia; Conyers, Georgia; Deming, New Mexico; and Cold Spring, Minnesota. In March 2001, a skinny kid, whom classmates called “Anorexic Andy,” walked into his high school in Santee, California, to reenact his version of Columbine. He killed two and wounded thirteen before being subdued. And in April 2002, Robert Steinhaeuser returned to Johann Gutenberg High School in Erfurt, Germany, to avenge his expulsion for forging a doctor's note: he killed two students and thirteen teachers before turning his gun on himself.

It's reassuring to think that either the work of the legal system or the educational system can reduce or eliminate altogether the threat of the unpredictable and the unforeseen. This is why we have childproof medicine bottles, penalties for not buckling up, informational literature on family planning for students in junior high school: these are all examples of reasonable responses to known problems. But the schoolyard massacre seems a problem of a different order. What legal or educational response could be equal to the chal-

lence of controlling the behavior of so many students from such varied backgrounds? Just how much surveillance would be required to bring the marginalized fraction of the student population back into the fold? How invasive would a curricular intervention have to be to succeed in instilling a set of preferable values in those who currently feel so deeply alienated while at school? While the answers to these questions are unknown, what we do know is this: the day after Columbine High School reopened, after all the public and private soul-searching in the community about the killings, after all the media coverage and analysis, after an enormous pep rally replete with bouncing cheerleaders, enthusiastic athletes, and all the mandatory school spirit one could ever hope for, swastikas were found scratched in a stall in one of the high school's newly painted bathrooms.

Eric Harris certainly didn't accept the idea that anyone was to blame for his actions or that anything could have been done to stop him or Dylan Klebold in going forward with their plan. Anticipating speculation of just this kind, Harris wrote in his diary:

i want to leave a lasting impression on the world. and god damnit do not blame anyone else besides me and V for this. dont blame my family, they had no clue and there is nothing they could have done. they brought me up just fucking fine, dont blame toy stores or any other stores for selling us ammo, bomb materials or anything like that because its not their fault. i dont want no fucking laws on buying fucking PVC pipes. we are kind of a select case here so dont think this will happen again. dont blame the school. dont fucking put cops all over the place just because we went on a killing spree doesnt mean everyone else will and hardly ever do people bring bombs or guns to school anyway. the admin. is doing a fine job as it is. i dont know who will be left after we kill but dammit don't change any policies just because of us. it would be stupid and if there is any way in this fucked up universe we can come back as ghosts we will haunt the life out of anyone who blames anyone besides me and V.³

If one accepts Harris's assertions, then the events at Columbine are largely without motive or meaning: the killing spree was a misguided grab for immortality by two young men at loose ends. If one rejects Harris's assertions, though, and persists in the pursuit for causes, one is left with the inescapable fact that the hierarchical, exclusionary environment of mandatory schooling fosters feelings of rage and helplessness that cannot be contained. The law

drives everyone into the schoolhouse; the educational system then sifts and sorts its way through the masses, raising expectations and crushing dreams as it goes. Eventually, something has to give.⁴

What is to be done? What is to be done? Only those utterly indifferent to the suffering of others can forestall asking this question for long. And, after any tragedy that involves the death of young people, it doesn't take long for someone to make the case that the problem lies with advanced technology and all the fantasy factories that it has spawned, which together have blurred the line between fact and fiction. After the Columbine shootings, Pat Schroeder, the former congresswoman from Colorado who now runs the Association of American Publishers, was among those who argued that we've reached the point where suburban kids are becoming mass murderers because we've created domestic spaces that isolate individuals in a technological sea of entertainment—the TV, the VCR, the computer, the entertainment center, the Internet, a different toy for everyone. “*This* is the beautiful family of America living the American dream,” Schroeder observed wryly. “But we need some ways to relate to each other as human beings. We need to work on getting connected.” Convinced that the virtual connections available in cyberspace tend to be divisive, Schroeder has committed herself to protecting the practice of reading books. Schroeder believes that book clubs and coffee bars provide a kind of embodied community unavailable on the Internet. These places where people go to discuss the printed word are, she says, “among the few civil institutions left. [They are] places to go see other people” (qtd. in Gross).

I share Schroeder's desire for a future where physical communion with others is still an option. You might say, in fact, that Schroeder and I come from the same secular faith tradition, that we share the same belief in reading's potentially redemptive power. And yet, there are dark days when I doubt the activities of reading and writing have much of a future. Indeed, after Columbine, it seems almost ludicrous to suggest that the social, psychological, and biochemical problems that contributed to this massacre might have been peacefully resolved if only Harris and Klebold had spent more time talking about what they were reading. Does reading really possess such curative powers? Does writing? Does group discussion?

Reading, writing, talking, meditating, speculating, arguing: these are the only resources available to those of us who teach the humanities and they are, obviously, resources that can be bent to serve any purpose. Harris and Klebold, in fact, wrote and produced for all different sorts of media; they read a range of material that supported their beliefs and that taught them how to put together their incendiary devices; they hung out with like-minded individuals and dis-

cussed their ideas. They relied on writing to post their scathing observations about their peers on Harris's Web site; they composed poems in their creative writing class that their teacher described as "dark and sad"; they created a video for a class project in which they acted out their fantasy of moving through the school gunning down their tormentors (Pooley 30–32). Harris even had the affectation of an English teacher, declaring on his Web site that one of the many habits he found unforgivable in his peers was the tendency to pronounce the "t" in "often": "Learn to speak correctly, you morons," he commands (Barron). They read, they wrote, they talked. And at the end of the process, they tried to kill everyone they could.

For some, it will hardly come as a surprise to learn that reading and writing have no magically transformative powers. But for those of us who have been raised into the teaching and publishing professions, it can be quite a shock to confront the possibility that reading and writing and talking exercise almost *none* of the powers we regularly attribute to them in our favorite stories. The dark night of the soul for literacy workers comes with the realization that training students to read, write, and talk in more critical and self-reflective ways cannot protect them from the violent changes our culture is undergoing. Helen Keller learning to see the world through a language traced into the palm of her hand; Malcolm X in prison memorizing the dictionary word by word; Paulo Freire moving among the illiterate masses in Brazil: we tell ourselves and our students over and over again about the power of reading and writing while the gap between rich and poor grows greater, the Twin Towers come crashing down, and somewhere some other group of angry young men is at work silently stockpiling provisions for the next apocalypse.

If you're in the business of teaching others how to read and write with care, there's no escaping the sense that your labor is increasingly irrelevant. Indeed, one way to understand the dark, despairing character of so much of the critical and literary theory that has come to dominate the humanities over the past two decades is to see this writing as the defensive response of those who have recognized but cannot yet admit that the rise of technology and the emergence of the globalized economy have diminished the academy's cultural significance. And so, to fight off the sense that words exercise less and less power in world affairs, one can declare that discourse plays a fundamental role in the constitution of reality. Rather than concede that reading as an activity has come to consume less and less time in the average person's life, one can insist that the canon wars are the ground upon which the nation's political future is being determined; rather than accept the fact that technological advances have taken control of publishing out of the hands of the few and transformed everyone with access to

the Internet into a potential author and critic, one can decry the movement of our culture's critical center from the university to the sound stage of the Oprah Winfrey Show. What is unthinkable in such pronouncements about the centrality of academic work is the possibility that the vast majority of the reading and writing that teachers and their students do about literature and culture more generally might not be all that important. It could all just be a rather labored way of passing the time.

I have these doubts, you see, doubts silently shared by many who spend their days teaching others the literate arts. Aside from gathering and organizing information, aside from generating critiques and analyses that forever fall on deaf ears, what might the literate arts be said to be good for? How—and in what limited ways—might reading and writing be made to matter in the new world that is evolving before our eyes? Is there any way to justify or explain a life spent working with—and teaching others to work with—texts? These are the questions that animate the meditations that follow. Those who have never felt the inner urgency of such questions need read no further.