CHAPTER 1

Intuitions In: Methodologies

I. Prefix/Silent Teachers

Parability. The poet Larry Eigner, who had cerebral palsy, taught me that word, though he never used it. I was preparing a conference paper on disability and literature and decided that with Eigner what I was encountering was better defined as parability. Eigner’s poems—characterized as they are by a sort of spatial topography that, noting their influence from American “projective verse” and resemblance to Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de Dés*, only more fragmented, yet more connected to the world—were for me best characterized as “tracts without organs” that suggested a simultaneous, wireless intuition of both the world of the everyday and more globalized views. The spaces between his words and “lines” allowed him to move from one to the other by means of a power realized on Eigner’s page that echoed Jack Spicer’s “theory” of the poet as “a counterpunching radio.”1 And then I thought, if parability—which I will provisionally define as the ability to tell improper stories, write improper poems, whose leaps from one image to another cannot be “justified” in traditional ways—was good enough for Eigner, it might be something worthwhile for the critic to attempt, noting that such simulation would of course look somewhat different in the language of criticism. Walter Benjamin, in *One Way Street*, wrote that when it comes to understanding culture, “[s]trength lies in improvisation,” where “[a]ll the decisive blows are struck left handed.”2 Was the author of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” talking about a left-handed radio? Undoubtedly Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, dominated by collaged quotes that are the textual version of photographs, is leading the reader-critic to the possibility of forming intuitions about culture in a manner that points as much to the future as the past, asserting
the indispensability of history and authorship even as it requires us to sense resonances between passages, pointing outside their original sources, their authorial intents, toward a utopian future that, to steal a neologism from Gertrude Stein, is “everybody’s autobiography.”3 This is a disposition that alters (without abolishing) the temporality of traditional literary criticism. We still revere documents and their authors in more traditional ways, the way we preserve sacred objects, but we also read them messianically, as pointing to a politics yet to come, yet to be formulated. In this sense, a literary object is a prefix that marks a singular starting point for the reader—as irreplaceable as it is always changing—but does not posit the reader as suffix.

In his discussion of parables and the “para,” J. Hillis Miller taught me, without putting it in quite these terms, that the best prefixes are those that, because of their oblique possibilities, always detour us, unpredictably, before the “fix” that never comes. Not locating us, such prefixes are themselves hard to locate:

“Para” is an “uncanny” double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master.4

Every “para,” then, is also a parasite, a place whose lack of location allows it to become a creature who, rather than sickening us, is “negentropic”—the motor of change or invention—recalling Benjamin’s art of interruption [collage]—consisting of a new logic with three elements: host, guest, and interrupter [interpreter] (‘noise is the random element, transforming one system or one order into another’).5 Parability and the parasite, regardless of the extent to which they are acknowledged as such, are thus agents of the interdisciplinary machines so integral to any study of literature and culture.

Prefixes, in this new economy, are no different than suffixes or any other morpheme of one’s choice. Each is a “cantilever” where innocence is “not the inn in which the Christ Child was born” but a device with support on only one end, but which can transport us using the cantilever resonance in micro-electro-mechanical systems (MEMS) into “some dark forest where we wander amazed.”6 In this sense, we can understand the object, literary or otherwise, as always abject, along with the subject, where both are thrown about (fect coming