NOT LONG AGO in a ghetto classroom, I attempted to lecture on the mystery of the sounds of our words to a roomful of diffident students. ("'Sumer is i-cumen in. . . .' The music of our words. We need Aretha Franklin's voice to fill plain words with music—her life. Don't you hear it? Songs on the car radio. Listen!") In the face of their empty stares, I tried to create an enthusiasm. But the girls in the back row turned to watch some boy passing outside. There were flutters of smiles, blushes of acne. Waves. And someone’s mouth elongated heavy, silent words through the barrier of glass. Silent words—the lips straining to shape each voiceless syllable: "Meet mee late errr." By the door, the instructor kept smiling at me, apparently hopeful that I would be able to spark an enthusiasm in the class. But only one student seemed to be listening. A girl around fourteen. In that grey room her eyes glittered with ambition. She kept nodding and nodding at all that I said; she even took notes. And each time I asked the class a question, she jerked up and down in her desk, like a marionette, while her hand waved over the bowed heads of her classmates. It was myself (as a boy) I saw as she faced me (now a man early in my thirties).

I first entered a classroom unprepared and barely able to speak English. Twenty-one years later, I concluded my studies in the stately quiet of the reading room of the British Museum.

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Thus with two sentences, I can outline my dramatic academic career. It will be harder to summarize what sort of life connects both of these sentences. For though I was a very good student, I was also a very bad student. I was a “scholarship boy,”

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a certain kind of scholarship student. Always successful. Always unconfident. Exhilerated by my progress. Yet sad. Anxious and eager to learn—the prized student. Too ambitious, too eager—an imitative and unoriginal pupil.

Certain factors important for my success are easy enough to mention. In the first place, my older brother and sister were very good students; they influenced me. (They brought home the bright, shiny trophies I came to want.) And, I attended an excellent grammar school. (Due to a simple geographical accident, our house in Sacramento neighbored one of the wealthiest sections of town; I went to a school, as a result, where I was the only “problem student” in class.) And, my mother and father always encouraged me. (At every graduation, they were behind the stunning flash of the camera when I turned to look at the crowd.)

As important as these factors were, however, they inadequately account for my advance. Nor do they suggest what an odd success I managed. Only moderately intelligent, I was highly ambitious, eager, desperate for the goal of becoming “educated.” My brother and two sisters enjoyed the advantages I had and were successful students, but none of them ever seemed so anxious about their schooling. I alone came home, when a new student, for example, and insisted on correcting the “simple” grammar and pronunciation mistakes of our parents. (“Two negatives make a positive!”) Regularly, I would ask my parents for help with my homework in order to be able to pull the book out of their hands, when they were unable to help me, and say, “I'll try to figure it out some more by myself.” Constantly, I quoted the opinions of teachers and trumpeted new facts I had learned. Proudly, I announced in my family's surprised silence—that a teacher had said I was losing all trace of my (Spanish) accent.

After a few months, I outgrew such behavior, it's true. I became more tactful. Less obvious about my ambitions. But with always-increasing intensity, I devoted myself to my studies. There never seemed enough time in a day “to learn”—to memorize—all that I wanted to know. I became bookish, a joke to my brothers, and puzzling to my parents. (“You won't find it in your books,” my brother would sneer when he often saw me reading; my father opened a closet one day and found me inside with my books.) Such ambitions set me apart, the only member of the family who deserved the pejorative label of scholarship boy.

What I am about to describe to you has taken me twenty years to admit: The primary reason for my success in the classroom was that I couldn't forget that schooling was changing me, and separating me from the life I had enjoyed before becoming a student. (That simple realization!) For years I never spoke to anyone about this boyhood fear, my guilt and remorse. I never mentioned these feelings to my parents or my brothers. Not to my teachers or classmates. From a very early age, I understood enough, just enough, about my experiences to keep what I knew vague, repressed, private, beneath layers of embarrassment. Not until the last months that I was a graduate student, nearly thirty years old, was it possible for me to think about the reasons for

1 For reasons of tone and verbal economy only, I employ the expression, scholarship boy, throughout this essay. I do not intend to imply by its usage that the experiences I describe belong to or are the concern solely of male students.

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my success. Only then. At the end of my schooling, I needed to determine how far I had moved from my past. The adult finally confronted—and now must publicly say—what the child shuddered from knowing and could never admit to the faces which smiled at his every success.

I

At the end, in the British Museum (too distracted to finish my dissertation), for weeks I read, speed-read, books by sociologists and educationists only to find infrequent and brief mention of scholarship students, "successful working-class students." Then one day I came across Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and saw, in his description of the scholarship boy, myself. For the first time I realized that there were others much like me, and I was able to frame the meaning of my academic failure and success.

What Hoggart understands is that the scholarship boy moves between environments, his home and the classroom, which are at cultural extremes, opposed. With his family, the boy has the pleasure of an exuberant intimacy—the family's consolation in feeling public alienation. Lavish emotions texture home life. *Then* at school the instruction is to use reason primarily. Immediate needs govern the pace of his parents' lives; from his mother and father he learns to trust spontaneity and non-rational ways of knowing. *Then* at school there is mental calm; teachers emphasize the value of a reflectiveness which opens a space between thinking and immediate action.

It will require years of schooling for the boy to sketch the cultural differences as abstractly as this. But he senses those differences early. Perhaps as early as the night he brings home some assignment from school and finds the house too noisy for study.

He has to be more and more alone, if he is going to "get on." He will have, probably unconsciously, to oppose the ethos of the hearth, the intense gregariousness of the working-class family group. Since everything centres upon the living-room, there is unlikely to be a room of his own; the bedrooms are cold and inhospitable, and to warm them or the front room, if there is one, would not only be expensive, but would require an imaginative leap—out of the tradition—which most families are not capable of making. There is a corner of the living-room table. On the other side Mother is ironing, the wireless is on, someone is singing a snatch of song or Father says intermittently whatever comes into his head. The boy has to cut himself off mentally so as to do his homework as well as he can.2

The next day, the lesson is as apparent at school. There are even rows of desks. The boy must raise his hand (and rehearse his thoughts) before speaking in a loud voice to an audience of students he barely knows. And there is time enough and silence to think about ideas ("big ideas") never mentioned at home.

Not for the working-class child alone is adjustment to the classroom difficult. Schooling requires of any student alteration of childhood habits. But the working-class child is usually least prepared for the change. Unlike most middle-class children, moreover, he goes home and sees in his parents a way of life that is not only different, but starkly opposed to that of the classroom. They talk and act in precisely the ways his teachers discourage. Without his extraordinary determination

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and the great assistance of others—at home and at school—there is little chance for success. Typically, most working-class children are barely changed by the classroom. The exception succeeds. Only a few become scholarship students. Of these, Richard Hoggart estimates, most manage a fairly graceful transition. They somehow learn to live in the two very different worlds of their day. There are some others, however, those Hoggart terms scholarship boys, for whom success comes with awkwardness and guilt.

Scholarship boy: good student, troubled son. The child is “moderately endowed,” intellectually mediocre, Hoggart suggests—though it may be more pertinent to note the special qualities of temperament in the boy. Here is a child haunted by the knowledge that one chooses to become a student. (It is not an inevitable or natural step in growing up.) And that, with the decision, he will separate himself from a life that he loves and even from his own memory of himself.

For a time, he wavers, balances allegiance. “The boy is himself (until he reaches, say, the upper forms) very much of both the worlds of home and school. He is enormously obedient to the dictates of the world of school, but emotionally still strongly wants to continue as part of the family circle” (p. 241). Gradually, because he needs to spend more time studying, his balance is lost. He must enclose himself in the “silence” permitted and required by intense concentration. Thus, he takes the first step toward academic success. But a guilt sparks, flickers, then flares up within him. He cannot help feeling that he is rejecting the attractions of family life. (There is no logic here, only the great logic of the heart.)

From the very first days, through the years following, it will be with his parents—the figures of lost authority, the persons toward whom he still feels intense emotion—that the change will most powerfully be measured. A separation will unravel between him and them. Not the separation, “the generation gap,” caused by a difference of age, but one that results from cultural factors. The former is capable of being shortened with time, when the child, grown older, comes to repeat the refrain of the newly adult: “I realize now what my parents knew. . . .” Age figures in the separation of the scholarship boy from his parents, but in an odder way. Advancing in his studies, the boy notices that his father and mother have not changed as much as he. Rather, as he sees them, they often remind him of the person he was once, and the life he earlier shared with them. In a way he realizes what Romantics also know when they praise the working-class for the capacity for human closeness, qualities of passion and spontaneity, that the rest of us share in like measure only in the earliest part of our youth. For Romantics, this doesn’t make working-class life childish. Rather, it becomes challenging just because it is an adult way of life.

The scholarship boy reaches a different conclusion. He cannot afford to admire his parents. (How could he and still pursue such a contrary life?) He permits himself embarrassment at their lack of education. And to evade nostalgia for the life he has lost, he concentrates on the benefits education will give him. He becomes an especially ambitious student. “[The scholarship boy] tends to make a father-figure of his form master” (p. 243), Hoggart writes with the calm prose of the social scientist. His remark only makes me remember with what urgency I idolized my teachers.

I began imitating their accents, using their diction, trusting their every direction. Any book they told me to read, I read—and then waited for them to tell me which books I enjoyed. I was awed by how much they knew. I copied their most casual
The Achievement of Desire: Personal Reflections on Learning “Basics” 243

opinions; I memorized all that they taught. I stayed after school and showed up on
Saturdays in order “to help”—to get their attention. It was always their encourage-
ment that mattered to me. They understood exactly what my achievements entailed.
My memory clutched and caressed each word of praise they bestowed so that, still
today, their compliments come quickly to mind.

I cannot forget either, though it is tempting to want to forget, some of the scenes
at home which followed my resolution to seek academic success. During the crucial
first months, the shy, docile, obedient student came home a shrill and precocious
son—as though he needed to prove (to himself? to his parents?) that he had made the
right choice. After a while, I developed quiet tact. I grew more calm. I became a
conventionally dutiful son; politely affectionate; cheerful enough; even—for reasons
beyond choosing—my father’s favorite. And in many ways, much about my home
life was easy, calm, comfortable, happy in the rhythm of the family’s routine: the
noises of radios and alarm clocks, the errands, the rituals of dinner and going to bed
in flannel pyjamas.

But withheld from my parents was most of what deeply mattered to me; the
extraordinary experience of my education. My father or mother would wonder:
“What did you learn today?” Or say: “Tell us about your new courses.” I would
barely respond. “Just the usual things. . . .” (Silence. Silence!) In place of the
sounds of intimacy which once flowed easily between us, there was the silence.
(The toll of my guilt and my loss.) After dinner, I would rush away to a bedroom
with papers and books. As often as possible I resisted parental pleas to “save lights”
by coming to the kitchen to work. I kept so much, so often to myself. Sad. Guilty
for the excitement of coming upon new ideas, new possibilities. Eager. Fascinated. I
hoarded the pleasures of learning. Alone for hours. Enthralled. Afraid. Quiet (the
house noisy), I rarely looked away from my books—or back on my memories.

It mattered that education was changing me. It never ceased to matter. I would
not have become a scholarship boy had it not mattered so much.

Walking to school with classmates sometimes, I would hear them tell me that
their parents read to them at night. Strange-sounding books like Winnie the Pooh.
Immediately, I asked them: “What is it like?” But the question only confused my
companions. So I learned to keep it to myself, and silently imagined the scene of
parent and child reading together.

One day—I must have been nine or ten years old at the time—my mother asked
for a “nice” book to read. (“Something not too hard that you think I might like.”)
Carefully, I chose one. I think it was Willa Cather’s My Antonia. But when, several
weeks later, I happened to see it next to her bed, unread except for the first few
pages, I was furious with impatience. And then suddenly I wanted to cry. I grabbed
up the book and took it back to my room.

“Why didn’t you tell us about the award?” my mother scolded—though her face
was softened with pride. At the grammar school ceremony, some days later, I felt
such contrary feelings. (There is no simple roadmap through the heart of the schol-
arship boy.) Nervously, I heard my father speak to my teacher and felt my familiar
shame of his accent. Then guilty for the shame. My instructor was so soft-spoken
and her words were edged clear. I admired her until it seemed to me that she spoke too carefully. Sensing that she was condescending to them, I was suddenly resentful. Protective. I tried to move my parents away. “You must both be so proud of him,” she said. They quickly answered in the affirmative. They were proud. “We are proud of all our children.” Then, this afterthought: “They sure didn’t get their brains from us.” I smiled. The three of them laughed.

But tightening the irony into a knot was the knowledge that my parents were always behind me. In many ways, they made academic success possible. They evened the path. They sent their children to parochial schools because “the nuns teach better.” They paid a tuition they couldn’t afford. They spoke English at home. (“Hablamos en English!”) Their voices united to urge me past my initial resistance to the classroom. They always wanted for my brothers and me the chances they never had.

It saddened my mother to learn about Mexican-American parents who wanted their children to start working after finishing high school. In schooling she recognized the key to job advancement. And she remembered her past. As a girl, new to America, she had been awarded a diploma by high school teachers too busy or careless to notice that she hardly spoke English. On her own she determined to learn how to type. That skill got her clean office jobs and encouraged an optimism about the possibility of advancement. (Each morning when her sisters put on uniforms for work, she chose a bright-colored dress.) She became an excellent speller—of words she mispronounced. (“And I’ve never been to college,” she would say smiling when her children asked about a word they didn’t want to look up in a dictionary.)

When her youngest child started going to high school, my mother found full-time employment. She worked for the (California) state government, in civil service positions, positions carefully numbered and acquired by examinations. The old ambition of her youth was still bright then. She consulted bulletin boards for news of new jobs, possible advancement. Then one day saw mention of something called an “anti-poverty agency.” A typing job. A glamorous job—part of the governor’s staff. (“A knowledge of Spanish desired.”) She applied without hesitation and grew nervous only when the job was suddenly hers.

“Everyone comes to work all dressed up,” she reported at night. And didn’t need to say more than that she hardly co-workers wouldn’t let her answer the phone. She was only a typist. Though a fast typist. And an excellent speller. There was a letter one day to be sent to a Washington cabinet officer. On the dictating tape my mother heard mention of “urban guerillas.” She typed (the wrong word, correctly): “gorillas.” Everyone was shocked. The mistake horrified the anti-poverty bureaucrats who, several days later, returned her to her previous position. She would go no further. She willed her ambition to her children.

After one of her daughters got a job ironing for some rich people we knew, my mother was nervous with fear. (“I don’t want you wearing a uniform.”) Another summer, when I came home from college, she refused to let me work as a gardener. “You can do much better than that,” she insisted. “You’ve got too much education now.” I complied with her wish, though I really didn’t think of schooling as job-training. It’s true that I planned by that time to become a teacher, but it wasn’t an occupation I aimed for as much as something more elusive and indefinite: I wanted
The Achievement of Desire: Personal Reflections on Learning “Basics” 245
to know as much as my teachers; to possess their confidence and authority; even to
assume a professor’s persona.

For my father, education had a value different from that it had for my mother. He chucked when I claimed to be tired by reading and writing. It wasn’t real work I did, he would say. “You’ll never know what real work is.” His comment would recall in my mind his youth. Orphaned when he was eight, he began working after two years in school. He came to America in his twenties, dreaming of returning to school and becoming an engineer. (“Work for my hands and my head.”) But there was no money and too little energy at the end of a day for more than occasional night-school courses in English and arithmetic. Days were spent in factories. He no longer expected ever to become an engineer. And he grew pessimistic about the ultimate meaning of work or the possibility of ever escaping its claims. (“But look at all you’ve accomplished,” his best friend once said to him. My father said nothing, and only smiled weakly.)

But I would see him looking at me with opened-mouth curiosity sometimes when I glanced up from my books. Other times, I would come upon him in my bedroom, standing at my desk or bookshelves, fingering the covers of books, opening them to read a few lines. He seemed aware at such moments of some remarkable possibility implied by academic activity. (Its leisure? Its splendid uselessness?) At the moment our eyes met, we each looked quickly away and never spoke.

Such memories as these slammed together in the instant of hearing that familiar refrain (all scholarship boys hear) from strangers and friends: “Your parents must be so proud.” Yes, my parents were happy at my success. They also were proud. The night of the awards ceremony my mother’s eyes were brighter than the trophy I won. Pushing back the hair from my forehead, she whispered that I had “shown” the gringos. Years later, my father would wonder why I never displayed my awards and diplomas. He said that he liked to go to doctors’ offices and notice the schools they had attended. My awards got left in closets. The golden figure atop a trophy was broken, wingless, after hitting the ground. Medals were put into a jar. My father found my high school diploma when it was about to be thrown out with the trash. He kept it afterwards with his own things.

“We are proud of all of our children.”

With more than mere pride, however, my parents regarded my progress. They endured my early precocious behavior—but with what private anger and humiliation? As their children grew older and would come home to challenge ideas both of them held, they argued with a son or daughter before submitting to the force of logic or superior evidence with the disclaimer: “It’s what we were taught in our time to believe.” These discussions ended abruptly, but my parents remembered them at other times when (smiling, unsmiling) they said that education was going to our heads. More importantly, both of them noticed how changed the family had become. My father himself retired into quiet, speaking to his children in paragraphs of single words or short phrases. My mother—the woman who joked that she would die if she ever stopped talking—softly wondered: “Why can’t we be more of a family? More in the Mexican style?” She asked the question of all her children. But the last one surely from whom she would have expected an answer was her youngest
son, the child who was so quiet at home, but had so much to say to high school instructors and his best friend’s mother—a college professor.

When the time came for me to go to college, I was the first in the family who asked to leave home. My departure only made physically apparent the separation that had occurred long before. But it was too stark a reminder. In the months preceding my departure, I heard the question my mother never asked except indirectly. In the hot kitchen, tired at the end of her workday, she demanded to know, “Why aren’t the schools here in Sacramento good enough for you? They were for your brothers.” In the middle of a long car ride, never turning to look at me, she wondered, “Why do you need to go so far away?” Late at night, ironing, she said with disgust, “Why do you have to put us through this big expense? You know your scholarship will never cover it all.” But when September came, there was a rush to get everything ready. In a bedroom, that last night, I packed the big brown valise. My mother sat nearby sewing initials onto the clothes I would take. And she said no more about my leaving. Nothing.

Months later, two weeks of Christmas vacation: the first hours home were the hardest. My parents and I sat in the kitchen and self-consciously had a conversation. (But lacking the same words to develop our sentences and to shape our interests, what was there to say? What could I tell them about the term paper I had just finished on “the universality of Shakespeare’s appeal”?) I mentioned only small, obvious things: my dormitory life, weekend trips I had taken, random and ordinary events. They responded with news of their own. (One was almost grateful for a family crisis about which there was much to say.) We tried, finally we failed, to make the conversation seem like more than an interview.

II

From an early age, I knew that my father and mother could read and write both English and Spanish. I had seen my father make his way through what, now I suppose, must have been income tax forms. On other occasions I waited apprehensively while my mother learned of a relative’s illness or death from letters airmailed from Mexico. For both of my parents, however, reading was something done out of necessity and as quickly as possible. Never did I see either of them read an entire book. Nor did I see them read for pleasure. Reading materials around our house were those of a nonliterate household: work manuals, prayer books, newspapers, and recipes. As Hoggart explains:

... At home [the scholarship boy] sees strewn around and reads regularly himself, magazines which are never mentioned at school, which seem not to belong to the world to which the school introduces him; at school he hears about and reads books never mentioned at home. When he brings those books into the house, they do not take their place with other books which the family are reading, for often there are none or almost none; his books look, rather, like strange tools. (p. 242).

Each school year would start with my mother’s instruction: “Don’t write in your books so we can sell them at the end of the year.” Teachers at school echoed the comment, but only in part: “Don’t write in your books, boys and girls. You must learn to treat them with care and respect.”

In the classroom, the written word possessed great authority, and reading and
writing were central activities. Reading especially. "You’ll learn to speak English well, if you practice your reading," a teacher told me. (She never explained how I had been able to speak Spanish at home without ever learning to read it.) In class, there were grammar books, spellers, elementary readers, and an odd phonetic alphabet to consult during the first months of instruction. "READ TO LEARN," read the poster over the teacher's desk in September. Every course had its own book. And what one read in a text was unquestioned. "OPEN THE DOORS OF YOUR MIND WITH BOOKS," the sign on the wall commanded in March. I privately wondered: What was the connection between reading and learning? And did an idea become an idea only when it was written down? Later, in June: “CONSIDER BOOKS YOUR BEST FRIENDS.” (Friends?) Reading was only a chore.

I needed to look up whole paragraphs of words in a dictionary. Lines of type were dizzying—the eye having to move slowly across the page, then down, and across... The sentences in the first books I read were coolly impersonal. Toned hard. Only informative. But mostly what bothered me was the silence reading required. To shield myself from it, I read in a soft voice. Until: "Who is doing all that talking to his neighbor?" an instructor shouted when my whispering punctured the silence of an afternoon reading period. Immediately, a tutorial was arranged with an ancient nun.

At the end of each schoolday, for nearly a year and a half, I would meet with her in the tiny room which served as the school's library, but was actually a storeroom for used textbooks and a vast collection of National Geographics. Everything about our sessions pleased me. The smallness of the room. The vague sounds of a few children, playing, screaming far away. The sound of the janitor's broom hitting the edge of the wall, as it came down the long hallway outside the door. The soft green of the sun, lighting the wall. And the old woman's face, blurred with a white beard.

Most of the time, we took turns reading. I began reading from some elementary text. The drab, ugly sentences: "The boys ran after the ball... He wanted to go to the party... The girls flew the yellow kite against the big, blue sky." Then the old nun would read from her favorite books, usually biographies of early American presidents. She playfully ran through complex sentences, mysteriously making written words sound friendly. Listening to her dramatic readings, I sensed for the first time some possibility of a fellowship between a reader and a writer and even a bond between readers, a communication never intimate like that I heard spoken words at home convey, but one profound and intensely personal nonetheless.

The nun ended the session one day by asking me why I was so reluctant to read by myself. I tried to explain my fears, said something about the way written words made me feel all alone—almost like, I wanted to add but didn’t, when I spoke to myself in a room just emptied of furniture. She studied my face as I spoke; she seemed to be watching more than listening. Then in an uneventful voice, she replied that I had nothing to fear. Didn’t I realize that reading would open up whole new worlds? A book was a kind of magic carpet. It would introduce me to new people and transport me to places and ancient times I never imagined existed. She gestured toward the bookshelves. (Bare-breasted African women danced and the shiny hubcaps of the automobiles on the back covers of old Geographics gleamed in my mind.) I listened respectfully, but her words were not very influential. I was thinking of another consequence of literacy, one I was too shy to admit but deeply trusted.
Books were going to make me educated. That confidence enabled me, a few months later, to overcome the initial difficulties of reading by myself.

In the third grade, I embarked on a grandiose reading program. "Give me the names of important books," I would say to startled teachers. They soon discovered I had in mind "adult books." I ignored their suggestions of anything I supposed to be written for children. (Not until I became a college student, as a result, did I read Huckleberry Finn or Alice in Wonderland.) Instead, I read books like Franklin's Autobiography and Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter. And whatever I read was for "extra credit." Each time I finished a book, I carefully reported the achievement to a teacher and basked in the praise my effort earned. Despite all of my reading, however, there seemed to be more and more books I needed to read. At the library, I literally trembled when I came upon whole shelves of unfamiliar titles. I read and I read. Librarians, initially worried when they saw me check out the maximum ten books at a time, started saving books for me they thought I would like. Teachers would say to the rest of the class, "I wish all of you took reading as seriously as Richard."

At home my mother would find me reading at times when I was supposed to be asleep or helping around the house or playing outside. She would ask, sometimes puzzled, or mad, or worried, or simply deeply curious: "What do you see in your books?" (Was reading some hobby like knitting? Was so much reading good for a boy? Was it a sign of fabulous intellect? Was it an evasion of responsibility?) Always she wondered: "What do you see...?"

What did I see in my books? I had the idea that they were crucial to my academic success, though I couldn’t have said exactly how or why. In the sixth grade I concluded that what gave a book its value was some major idea or theme it contained. If that core essence could be found and then memorized, I would become learned like my teachers. I decided to record in a notebook the themes of the books I had read. After finishing Robinson Crusoe, I wrote that its theme was the "value of learning to live by yourself." When I completed Wuthering Heights, I noted "the danger of letting emotions get out of control." Re-reading these moralistic appraisals left me disheartened. I couldn’t really believe that they were the source of the value of reading. For many more years, however, they comprised the only means I had of describing to myself the educational value of literature.

In spite of such earnestness, reading was in various ways a pleasurable experience. I had favorite writers—although ironically those I most enjoyed reading were the writers I was least able to value. When I read William Saroyan’s The Human Comedy, for example, immediately I was pleased by the narrator’s warmth and the charm of the story. But as quickly I became suspicious. A book so easy and pleasurable couldn’t be very important, I decided. Another summer, I determined to read all the novels of Dickens. I loved the feeling I received after the first hundred pages of being at home in a complicated fictional world, and I was bothered by the way I was pushed away from the novel, at its conclusion, when the fiction closed tight, like a fortune teller’s fist, with the futures of the major characters neatly concluded. I never knew how to take such feelings seriously. Nor did I suspect that these experiences could be part of a novel’s meaning.

There were other pleasures reading provided. Each time I completed a book, I realized a feeling of great accomplishment. I would run my fingers along the edge of
the pages and marvel at how much I had achieved. Around my room, the growing stacks of paperback books reinforced my assurance. Gradually, too, I came to love the lonely company of books. Early on weekday mornings, I would get up to read. I felt a mysterious comfort then, reading in the dawn quiet—the grey silence interrupted only by the churning of the refrigerator motor a few rooms away or the sounds of a city bus beginning its run. On weekends, I read in an uncrowded corner of the neighborhood library or, if the weather was fine, I would take my books to the park. Warm summer evenings were my favorite time to read. Neighbors would leave for vacations and have me water their lawns. I would sit for hours on their porches or in backyards, reading to the crisp, cool whirling sounds of sprinklers.

I entered high school having read hundreds of books. I was able to say something about Meister Eckhart and Jane Austen and Engels and James Baldwin. I sensed the shape of Western thought. My habit of reading also made me a confident speaker and writer of English. In these several ways, reading brought me success as my first teachers had promised it would. But I was not a good reader. Merely bookish, I lacked a point of view when I read. (Rather I read in order to acquire a point of view.) I vacuumed books for epigrams, scraps of information, ideas, “themes”—anything which would fill the hollow within me and make me feel more educated.

When one of my teachers suggested to his drowsy ninth-grade English class that a person could not have a “complicated idea” until he had read at least two thousand books, I heard the remark without detecting either its irony or its complicated truth. I determined instead to compile a list of all the books I ever had read. Harsh with myself, I included only once a title I might have read several times. (How, after all, could one really read a book more than once?) And I included only those books over a hundred pages in length. (Could anything shorter be a book?)

There was yet another high school list. One day, I came across a newspaper story about the retirement of an English professor at a nearby college. The article was accompanied by a list of “the hundred most important books of Western civilization.” “More than anything else in my life,” the teacher told a reporter with finality, “these books have made me all that I am.” That was the kind of remark I couldn’t ignore. I clipped out the list and kept it for the several months it took me to read all of the titles. But most books I barely understood. While reading Plato’s Republic, for example, I needed to keep consulting the book-jacket comments to remind myself what the text was all about. Nonetheless, with the special patience of a scholarship boy, I looked at every word of the text and by the time I reached the last page, I convinced myself that I had read the Republic. In a ceremony of pride, I solemnly crossed Plato off my list.

III

The scholarship boy pleases most when he is young. To teachers, he offers great satisfaction; his success is their proudest achievement. Many other persons offer their help. A businessman hears the boy’s story and promises to underwrite the cost of his college education. A woman leaves him her entire library of several hundred books when she moves. His progress is even featured in a newspaper article. Everyone is very happy for him. They marvel. (“How did you manage . . . so fast?” they ask.) From all sides, there is lavish praise and encouragement.

Altruism alone cannot explain the pleasure—the ambiguous reaction—of all those
who want the boy's success, but only if he remains, in some way, unchanged. The scholarship boy for a time offers complex delight. When he is young, the boy seems to straddle two great opposing cultures. Struggling for academic success, he still seems a child of the working-class and thereby suggests a remarkable possibility: the ancient dream of reconciling a way of life that is primarily active with one that is primarily reflective. Few persons who expect such a spectacular achievement from the boy probably are conscious of doing so. Their expectations become apparent, however, when they are finally disappointed, when the scholarship boy grows older and changes too much.

By the time he makes it to college, the boy hears less praise. Sometimes, he may even detect a trace of scorn on the faces of some who watch him. It is initially puzzling. In college, he behaves very much as he has always. If anything is different, it is that he dares anticipate the successful completion of his work. At last he feels comfortable and secure in the classroom. But this is precisely the source of the dissatisfaction he causes. To many persons who watch him, he appears suddenly too much the academic. There may be some things about him which still recall his beginnings—his shabby clothes; perhaps the hint of an accent; his persistent poverty; or his complexion (in those cases when it symbolizes his parents' disadvantaged condition)—but they only make clear how far he has moved from his past. He has used education to remake himself.

Many hope for someone quite different, a boy-man who would not be substantially changed by his schooling. An independent student. A working-class child, and an academic success. Someone impatient with his teachers when he hears them construct their lofty abstractions. A passionate pupil. Questioning. Scornful of his classmates' ignorance of the way "real" people live. A boy who would graduate a man with sharpened intellect and the knowledge of books but still be someone able to return home, still his parents' son and recognizable by "his people" as one of their own.

Instead there is the scholarship boy!

How many persons, I wonder, could have seen me in college and graduate school without feeling great disappointment? (The student whose surname was Rodriguez! The student with dark skin! The son of immigrant parents!) I had by that time become no different from other students around me. But though no different from them, I was more disappointing. The seminar room jargon coming from me sounded especially odd. (Bubbles at the tip of my tongue: "Topos . . . negative capabilities . . . vegetation images in Shakespearean comedy." All clearly borrowed opinions: something from Leavis, something else from Empson or Coleridge. No thought of my own.) I spoke by then without trace of a Spanish accent. (I spoke and read French and Italian better than I could Spanish.) My eyes watched the instructor. My voice caught as I offered an answer. And when I was finally praised, there was an inevitable blush of contentment, a smile of modest pride on my face.

When he is older and so little of the person he was survives, the scholarship boy makes apparent his profound lack of self-confidence. Richard Hoggart complains:

[The boy] tends to over stress the importance of examinations, of the piling-up of knowledge and of received opinions. He discovers a technique of apparent learning, of the acquiring of facts rather than of the handling and use of facts. He learns how to receive a
purely literate education, one using only a small part of the personality and challenging only a limited area of his being. He begins to see life as a ladder, as a permanent examination with some praise and some further exhortation at each stage. He becomes an expert imbiber and doler-out; his competence will vary, but will rarely be accompanied by genuine enthusiasms. He rarely feels the reality of knowledge, of other men’s thoughts and imaginings, on his own pulses; he rarely discovers an author for himself and on his own. . . . He has something of the blinkered pony about him. (p. 243)

This is criticism more accurate than it is fair. The scholarship boy is a bad student, but in large part the reason he is so bad is that he realizes earlier and more acutely than most other students—than Hoggart himself!—that education requires radical self-reformation. As a very young boy he knows this; he knows it too well. He cannot forget that the academy is responsible for remaking him. That is why he depends on it so much. He becomes, in obvious ways, the worst student, the great mimic, the last student who ever feels obliged to voice an opinion of his own. But he would not be so bad—nor would he become so successful—if he did not accurately perceive that the truer synonym for “education” is not “learning” but “imitation.” And that education is mainly a long, unglamorous, and even demeaning process of acquiring skills and habits of mind—a nurturing never natural to the persons we were once, before first entering the classroom.

Those who would take the scholarship boy’s success—his failure—seriously would be forced to realize how great is the change any academic undergoes, how far they have moved from their pasts. It is easier to ignore such considerations. For good reason is little mentioned about the scholarship boy in pages and pages of educational literature. Instead, one hears proposals for increasing the self-esteem of students and encouraging early intellectual independence. (The platitudes ignore altogether the function of imitation in a student’s life—and the fact that the “best” students must also be those least independent.) Self-styled radical teachers complain, meanwhile, that ghetto schools attempt to mold students and that they stifle native characteristics. But the much more acute critique should be just the reverse: not that schools change students too much, but that while they might promote the scholarship boy, they change most students barely at all.

There is no specific pedagogy of the ghetto to glean from the story of the scholarship boy. There is, however, a much larger lesson. At once different from most other students, the scholarship boy is also the archetypal student. He exaggerates the difficulty of being a student, but his exaggeration reveals a general predicament. Others are changed as much as he. They too learn by imitation. They develop the skill of memory long before they become truly critical thinkers. And when they read Plato for the first several times, it is with awe rather than a deep comprehension.

The impact of schooling on the scholarship boy is only more apparent—to the boy himself and to others. Finally, although he may be laughable, “the blinkered pony,” the boy will not let his critics totally forget their own “failure.” He ends up too much like them. When he speaks, they hear themselves echoed. In his pedantry, they face their own. His ambitions are theirs. If his failure was singular, they would readily pity him. But he is much more troubling than that; they would not scorn him if this was not so.

Nearing the end of my education, I looked back and, for the first time, recalled my past with nostalgia. The same longing fills Hoggart’s scholarship boy. Hoggart’s
The Achievement of Desire: Personal Reflections on Learning “Basics” 253

description of the boy’s nostalgia, however, is stripped of sympathy and coated with scorn:

He longs for the membership he has lost, “he pines for some Nameless Eden where he
never was.” The nostalgia is the stronger and the more ambiguous because he is really
“in quest of his own absconded self yet scared to find it.” He both wants to go back and
yet thinks he has gone beyond his class, feels himself weighted with knowledge of his
own and their situation, which hereafter forbids him the simpler pleasures of his father
and mother. (p. 246)

Hoggart judges this nostalgia a result of two failures. The scholarship boy senses
that he will never be fully accepted as an equal by other academics. Additionally, he
remains still the uncertain scholar, unable to master the skills and tasks of the class-
room.

This fate does not resemble, however, what happened to me. When, as a graduate
student, I arrived in London to write my dissertation on English Renaissance litera-
ture, I was confident of having at last become an academic. But the exhilaration that
confidence brought dimmed as, after only a few weeks in the British Museum, it
grew clear that I had joined a lonely community of scholars. Around me each day
were heads partly hidden by piles of pages and books. Some persons I sat beside day
after day, yet we passed silent at the end of each day, strangers. Still, although we
were strangers, we were united by a common respect for the written word and the
value we placed on scholarship. We did form a union, albeit one primarily theoreti-
cal.

More profound, but more troubling, was the bond I felt with the writers of the
books I consulted. Whenever I opened texts which had not been used for years, I
realized that my special interests united me to a handful of other academics. We
formed an exclusive (eccentric!) company, separated from other persons who would
never care or be able to understand our concerns. Again, this was a lonely and
impersonal society. The reward of my membership in such company seemed sud-
denly thin compensation for the loss of my intimate society of childhood. (The
pages I turned were dusty and stiff.) Who, I began to wonder, would ever read what
I wrote? And, was my dissertation much more than an act of social withdrawal?
The questions seemed unanswered by the dank silence of the Museum reading
room.

Meanwhile, my file cards accumulated. A professional, quick and efficient, I
knew exactly how to look for information I needed. I could quickly determine the
usability of what I read. But whenever I started to write, I knew too much—and not
enough—to be able to write anything but sentences that were little more than cau-
tious and timid, strained brittle under the heavy weight of footnotes and qualifica-
tions. I seemed unable to make a passionate statement. I felt drawn by profes-
sionalism to the edge of sterility, capable of little more than a pedantic, lifeless, and
unreadable prose.

Then the nostalgia began. After twenty-one years, school years spent trying to
forget the attractions of my past, I suddenly yearned for the time in my life when I
was not so alone with my ideas; when ideas didn’t seem so removed from experi-
ence; when ideas were felt; and—most of all—when there was the solace of an inti-
mate company. Yearning became preoccupation. Memories beckoned, then flooded
my mind. (A sudden embrace. The early idea of death in the child’s massacre of
hundreds of ants. The whispered sound of Spanish at night. . . .) Less and less time was spent on the dissertation; more was spent reading sociologists. I needed to understand how far I had moved from my past—to determine how fast I would be able to recover something of it once again.

Then I came home. After a year in the library, my first months I worked as a laborer, shirtless and exhilarated by sensations of sweating and fatigue, my hands confident with a shovel. Those first few months back in America I lived with my parents, deeply relieved by how easy it was to be with them both. Although we had little to say, I noticed suddenly (watching carefully for evidence) the thin, firm strands of the unconscious which bind generations. (Of course, people had been right, I concluded, when they recognized that my mother and I laughed the same way. And, could it be possible that when my father spoke Spanish, he sounded a tone that I also achieved when I wrote English?) After the early relief, this return, however, brought a later suspicion, nagging until it led to a certain realization, that I had not side-stepped the impact of the years of my schooling. My desire to do so was the measure of just how much I remained an academic. Negatively (for that is how this idea first occurred to me): my ability and need to think so much (so abstractly!) about my life and my relationship to my parents was already indication of a long education. My mother and father, by comparison, did not pass their time thinking about the “cultural” meaning of their experience. It was I, who had been taught to conceptualize experience, who described their daily lives in an idea. And yet, positively: the ability to use abstract ways of thinking about experience had allowed me to shape into desire what would have been only indefinite longings in the British Museum. If, because of my schooling, I had become separated from my parents, my education had also given me in the end a way to speak and to care about that fact.

My best teachers in college and graduate school, years earlier, had tried to prepare me for this conclusion, I think, when they described pastoral and Romantic literature. I noted all that they said. I even memorized it. “The praise of the unlettered by those who are highly educated is one of the primary themes of ‘elitist’ literature.” But, “The importance of the praise given the unsolitary, richly passionate life is that it simultaneously reflects the value of reflective life.”

I heard it all. But there was no way for any of it to mean very much to me. I was a scholarship boy then, busily laddering my way up the rungs of education. To pass an examination, I wrote down what my instructors said. It took many more years of learning and reading (my inevitable miseducation), as I slowly came to trust the silence and the habit of abstracting from immediate experience—moving away from a life of closeness and immediacy I remembered in my parents, growing older—before I turned, unafraid, to desire the past, and thereby achieved what had eluded me for so long, the end of education.