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***Arts of Living: Reinventing the Humanities for the Twenty-first Century***, by Kurt Spellmeyer. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. 312 pages.

Reviewed by Beth Brunk-Chavez, The University of Texas at El Paso

As I was flying home from a conference, a particularly chatty person next to me saw the title of Kurt Spellmeyer's book: *Arts of Living*. Curious, she asked what kind of self-help book I was reading. I briefly explained to her that this was a different kind of book—one of the "academic sort." Of course, the conversation ended there. However, after finishing the text and pondering it for many days, I'm left to wonder if her question wasn't more astute than I initially thought. Spellmeyer's *Arts of Living*, after all, has altered the ways I think about my research, my teaching, my purpose for working and being inside the academy.

After reading and thinking about chapter 6, I realized why the book is titled *Arts of Living*—here is where, at least for me, he fleshes out the connection between humanities and life—or rather the disconnection that the academy has created. Of course, these connections are present throughout the first five chapters.

As Spellmeyer warns from the first sentence of the text, "the humanities must change" if they are to survive (3). The largest issue, he finds, is that the humanities have become completely removed from the worlds outside the academy. Spellmeyer's argument isn't a new one. Lisa Ruddick's *Chronicle* article "The Near Enemy of the Humanities is Professionalism" argues that "for years, literary scholarship has been refining the art of stepping away from humane connection" (B7). She cites then MLA president Linda Hutcheon's address that "condemns our current way of doing business as intellectually cliquish, arrogant, and competitive." There are a good number of similar cries. What makes Spellmeyer's *Arts of Living* singular in its approach, however, is the care he takes in tracing the way the humanities have gotten into this situation.

He gives us an incredibly detailed education into how the humanities as a discipline began and who some of the academic forerunners are, an education

I think every graduate student who is considering academia must have. But one, sadly, of which I had very little knowledge. While there isn't the space to provide details here, I was repeatedly astonished by the breadth of his historical account. In part 1, Spellmeyer details the conditions and trends in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century that lead to the establishment of the American university as an institution and the scientific approach to the humanities. In chapter 2, he considers the growing divide between the populists and the progressives who established a "culture of specialization" where local knowledge ceased to count for something. In chapter 3, Spellmeyer examines the cultural and social divide that widened between the professionals and the ordinary citizen. Knowledge, instead of being disseminated to the masses, became the interest of other professionals. Medicine and law were the first disciplines to professionalize their knowledge. Following their lead, at the risk of appearing less scientific, the humanities grew to take on a more reductionist, scientific approach to knowledge.

Chapter 4 begins to scrutinize the humanities, specifically English. In 1909, the president of the MLA declared that "the humanities had lost the competition with the 'technicals,' and the result was a growing cultural crisis" (73). People were reading whatever they could get their hands on—what most academics considered "vulgar." As a result, literary studies "had to establish itself as a specialized knowledge with a unique and indispensable social function in the administered society" (77). Historicism delivered literary studies a methodology that appeared at least quasi-scientific. So, not only did an individual need to attend the university to learn what to read but also how to read.

Chapter 5, a chapter I found to be both fascinating and profoundly sad, features James Agee, a journalist best known for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, who came to believe that "real learning . . . had become virtually impossible inside the vast, cumbersome machinery of the schools" (99). *Fortune* magazine sent him out with photographer Walker Evans to document rural life without culture, education, and so on. But Agee found truths they didn't want to see. He found that a life without control and academic certainty made him feel more alive and wondered how "the educated, leisured people who should by rights be profoundly happy live as unhappily as the Gudgers, in spite of all our comfort" (109). Critic Lionel Trilling declared that Agee had "idealiz[ed] people more deserving of our pity" (104). While the Frankfurt School expressed similar sentiments as Agee, they privileged their work of critique and criticism over face-to-face engagement with people. Just as Trilling, the Frankfurt School, and critics like Jonathan Culler have turned away from experience to the "somber pleasures of 'textuality'," so have the humanities (113).

The academy has created a culture distanced from the real world. Critical theory reflects a privileged way of reading, an aristocratic origin which suggests not everyone is capable of reading a text—at least of seeing what we need to see. They must depend on us, the experts, to reveal what isn't transparent. That requires training. People must be taught to read this way. It's a closed circle. We only talk to

each other. We teach these ideas to people who will take our place. Critical theory can change ideas, but not actions or real life.

What is Spellmeyer's solution? To create a dialogue. Although Rutgers made a valid attempt at implementing the kinds of changes Spellmeyer envisions as necessary to saving the humanities, the results were few. The writing program, however, became the logical, and perhaps only, possible locus for these changes. Students are encouraged to read, discuss, and write about issues that will affect them in the next twenty years. So, in the end, Spellmeyer is not suggesting that we stop reading literature, that we stop studying history, that we stop philosophizing. Not at all. What he is suggesting is that we stop practicing these for their own sake. Rather, we read literature in such a way as to help students make sense of the world.

So, as I finished each chapter, considered the book as a piece, I found myself asking some pretty hard questions: What am I doing to perpetuate the system? What am I doing to change it? What attracted me to this profession, this discipline, in the first place? And, why do I feel the need to teach others about it? I believe Spellmeyer would agree that these are the kinds of questions that we as educators within the humanities need to ask ourselves. But, not just ask ourselves; discover the answers and do something with them. English Departments, he suggests, need to begin to measure their worth according to their impact on the community and their circulation of ideas into the general public (18). Later he applauds the work of such academic humanists as Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard Rorty, Henry Louis Gates, and Stephen Ambrose whose works purposefully and successfully stretch beyond the reading academy and even into television (238). We must reinvent, relocate, resituate ourselves.

At our end of the fall semester English Department party, several students were awarded scholarships. One returning student commented that after raising her children, she decided to finish her degree. She went on to say that the only thing she found the time or space to do while raising those two kids was to read. Therefore, she figured the thing she was most qualified for was an English degree. While I certainly don't mean to belittle her accomplishments and realize that it was something anecdotal and humorous to say in a rather uncomfortable moment, this is an individual example of what Spellmeyer critiques. What do English majors do? They read. They talk about what they read. They teach others to read and talk about what they read. No one would argue that students must learn the importance of critically engaging with texts, but what then?

Not everyone who reads Spellmeyer's text will agree wholeheartedly; as John Brereton states in his blurb, it's "guaranteed to be controversial." And, rightly so. Spellmeyer has few kind words for critical theorists, contending that critique is an illusion by which we only change our ideas when we should be seeking to change actual lives. Even if one does not agree with parts or most of his arguments, *Arts of Living*, I believe, is an important read for every humanities scholar and teacher.

*El Paso, TX*

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