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Performative Transversations: Collaborations Through and Beyond Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*

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> Beginning in sixteenth-century England, a distinct criminal culture of rogues, vagabonds, gypsies, beggars, cony-catchers, cutpurses, and prostitutes emerged and flourished. This community was self-defined by the criminal conduct and dissident thought promoted by its members, and officially defined by and against the dominant preconceptions of English cultural normality. In this book I argue that this amalgamated criminal culture, consisting of a diverse population with much racial, ethnic, and etiological ambiguity, was united by its own aesthetic, ideology, language, and lifestyle. In effect, this criminal culture constituted a subnation that illegitimately occupied material and conceptual space within the English nation. With its own laws and customs, it was both independent of and dependent on England's official (mainstream) culture. It was self-governing but needed the law-abiding populace for food and shelter and as a social entity against which to define itself. I also argue that the enduring presence of this criminal culture markedly affected the official culture's aesthetic sensibilities, systems of belief, and socioeconomic organization. It was both conducted by and a conductor for what I call "transversal power." (Bryan Reynolds, *Becoming Criminal* 1)

Beginning in sixteenth-century England, a distinct academic culture of friars, professors, mathematicians, magicians, astrologers, adepts, and students emerged and flourished. This community was self-defined by the academic conduct and dissident thought promoted by its members, and officially defined by and against the dominant preconceptions of English cultural normality. In this concluding chapter we argue that this amalgamated academic culture, consisting of a diverse population with much etiological ambiguity, was united by its own

aesthetic, ideology, language, and lifestyle. In effect, this academic culture constituted a subnation that illegitimately occupied material and conceptual space within the English nation. With its own laws and customs, it was both independent of and dependent on England's official (mainstream) culture. It was self-governing but needed the law-abiding populace for food and shelter and as a social entity against which to define itself. We also argue that the enduring presence of this academic culture markedly affected the official culture's aesthetic sensibilities, systems of belief, and socioeconomic organization. It was both conducted by and a conductor for what we call "transversal power."

The repetition, replacement, and commonality effected between the preceding two paragraphs – the correlation between one form of heterodoxy and another, situated historically and effected by a substitution of terms and positions – marks an opening in a broader set of arguments concerning the genealogy of modern "*homo academicus*." These arguments, which at their core pertain to the writing, now, of this very book, pertain also to the relationship among the official culture of the university and the relative force of academic discourse. This force may be either transversal or state-oriented – a force that works either to effect conceptual, emotional, and/or material flux or that works to consolidate stability. Hence our analysis has several purposes, some historical, having to do with the once past-present now absent-spaces of early modern England, and others pertaining to both the present-spaces and the future-present-spaces created by fugitive explorations in scholarly research. In the first place, negotiating the past-present with the absent, we will examine how Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* raises a series of questions about the legitimating of knowledge-claims and methods of intellectual inquiry during the early modern period, about the status of so-called "scientific" thought in early modern culture, and about the relationship between the specialized and necessarily exclusive epistemologies of the academy and the more widely disseminated and normative discourses that constitute what is conventionally referred to as "popular culture." Secondly, we hope to demonstrate how these problems must be understood as extending into the beginning of the twenty-first century, when many of the structures and relationships visible in Greene's play have assumed an even more elaborate form: Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay are finally shadowy figures for ourselves, and so the arguments that follow should be read as an examination of the articulatory space that we refer to as "performative transversations" in modern academic discourse.

The historical premises of our investigation are clear enough and may be stated concisely. For specific reasons associated with the emergence of "humanism" in England and its effect on the institutional organization of the universities and their curricular emphases; with a rapidly centralizing and expansionist Tudor state; with growing interest across all levels of English society in technology, applied mathematics, and proto-"experimental" methods of inquiry; and with the development of an urban consumer culture capable of supporting an increasingly differentiated market in books and public entertainment, the position of *homo academicus*, as we shall designate him – the Bachelor and Master of Arts; the lecturer, instructor, and professor; the practitioner, secretary, or "reader"; the poet, playwright, and "man of letters" – gradually came to require a more precise and more explicit definition by early modern contemporaries. This pressure derived from primarily three sources, one "internal" and two "external" to the aspiring *homo academicus* per se: first, from the subjective territory of the academic himself, who sought to secure the prestige and influence that might attend on perceived authority and expertise in a particular field and official territory; second, from sociopolitical conductors – individuals and institutions – which disposed of wealth and power, and needed to evaluate the claims of those who sought their patronage; and third, from sociopolitical conductors – unofficial as well as official – which sought to circumscribe, negate, or otherwise discredit the authority of the academic subject, either for reasons of professional rivalry or of ideological difference. The most famous examples of this phenomenon indicate how the struggle to define the position of *homo academicus* took place well beyond the university itself as a specific field of academic practice and indeed depended crucially on the patronage of sources of power that were non-academic, as the cases of Gabriel Harvey, John Dee, Thomas Blundeville, Thomas Harriott, and many others demonstrate. This was particularly true of those men who were seeking to attain patronage through their expertise in the emerging yet nevertheless still fugitive fields of mathematics and technology.

In the character of Friar Bacon, Greene has created a figure who condenses several variables that were converging to define the position of the academic subject *inside* the university system at the end of the sixteenth century in England, and it is this position within the university field, as well as its relationship to extra-academic institutionalized power within and outside of the demarcated arenas monitored by the state machinery, that we will be considering here. Elsewhere, in our essay, "From *Homo Academicus* to *Poeta Publicus*: Celebrity and Transversal Knowledge in Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*

(c. 1589)," we explain the relevance of Friar Bacon's position within the academic field to Greene's *own* position as *homo academicus*-becomings-*poeta publicus*: to Greene's attempt, in other words, to *distance* himself from the university in order to achieve a position in the emerging market for playwright and commercial publication.[1] In all three cases – that of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, that of Greene himself, and that of ourselves – the act of public performance becomes a critical point of refraction where the field of *homo academicus* may be modeled and its relationship to various sociopolitical conductors and other forms of institutionalized power understood.

Greene's play offers a remarkably sharp definition of the different fields of power in which late-sixteenth-century *homo academicus* found himself positioned: as a discrete institutional entity, the University of Oxford is imagined as an official territory with its own internal hierarchies, resources, and semi-autonomous identity, as indicated by the repeated references to the "academic state" (Greene 2.165) by various agents distributed throughout the sociopolitical fields represented in the play. This community is constituted through its relationship to monarchical power and the national community; through its relations with an international network of scholars and rival institutions; and through its internal separation into colleges and academic subcommunities organized around specific intellectual problems and methods of research – as is the case within the university system today. Much of the play's action may be described as a symbolic attempt to examine the relationships within and among these three primary fields as they are submitted to the stresses of contestation when phenomena of assimilation, transformation, and expulsion are at work – when what Glenn Odom and Bryan Reynolds describe as "pressurized belongings" occur (see Chapter 8), all of which typically accompany struggles for dominance:

> Pressurized belongings ... are the related and often conflicting processes of assimilation and expulsion by which one becomes a member of an alternative group, subjective territory, or official territory at the expense of one or more of its members. The new member causes overflow or reconfiguration such that not all of the extant members can remain the same or remain at all if the system is to maintain equilibrium. This is not to say that the substance of the group necessarily drastically changes or that there is transformation of the parameters within which the group maneuvers, but rather that there is only room for so many members of certain kinds.

Accordingly, the international rival to Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, Jacques Vandermast, arrives in the company of the Emperor and the English King in order to test the reputation of the English institutions; his function is to assist the Emperor in the political domination of the English nation through a battle of wits and necromantic surplus – a steroid occult infusion – that takes the place of an actual military exercise, and his defeat by Friar Bacon marks a temporary alliance between two intra-national sociopolitical entities (University and Crown) in order to reassert the strength of the "native" political body and official territory. This struggle, however, also reveals the deep independence and even the antagonism between Crown and University, and it is prosecuted by Friar Bacon for several reasons: first, to secure a transfer of both material and symbolic resources from the former to the latter in exchange for a temporary political alignment and the expenditure of the university's symbolic capital; and, secondly, and perhaps more importantly, in order to secure for Bacon himself the symbolic capital that derives from royal recognition and gratitude in order to buttress his own position and intensify his affective presence – the combined material, symbolic, and imaginary existence of a concept/object/subject/event and its multiplicities – within the strained economy of the university field, where his long-standing research program has suddenly been discredited.

Such are the broad outlines that structure the play's imaginative fiction, which, through the principle of homology may be seen to correspond to the structure of the international and national political field at the end of the sixteenth century in the West. We have taken the principle of homology from the work of Pierre Bourdieu,[2] where the term designates an analogical similarity in structural situation between different subfields in a society: therefore, a dominant position in the economic field may often be correlated with a dominant position in the field of political and legal power, while a dominated position in one field often corresponds with a dominated position in another, thereby stratifying subjective and official territories structurally and methodologically, if not also sociopolitically and ideologically. As we argue in "From *Homo Academicus* to *Poeta Publicus*," the position of the playwright in England at the end of the sixteenth century provides a particularly strong example of the principle of homology and the complexity of cultural analysis that it permits: the playwright is in a relatively dominated position both economically and politically, and this homological correspondence itself enables a separate homological identification with other dominated positions and the expression of this identification in

symbolic form. At the same time, as Bourdieu argues, the playwright's real social power lies in his capacity to nominate meaningful sociopolitical categories and to control, in part, their representation and circulation in symbolic form; and in this he enjoys a dominant position that is out of proportion to – one that tends to invert – his economic and legal power.

Hence, the principle of homology provides an important methodological tool that may account for the heterodox, fugitive, or transversal attitudes often visible in early modern plays, especially when applied in conjunction with what we call the "principle of citationality," which refers to a layering of individually legible codes – and therefore often also laminated ideologies – represented on stage, in any social performance, or in any expressive medium, such as this one. Through their simultaneous yet staggered articulation, citational codes concentrate and extend the significance of the-code-that-can-be-cited (the very definition of a code), but at the same time refract that code, enabling a defamiliarizing and analytic gaze that the early moderns called "theater" – that ancient technology of beholding – and that we call "theory." Under the effects of homology and citationality – double-fisted theoretical punches that strike at the heart of legitimate sources of power and belief – the dominated position of the playwright vis à vis the early modern market, state machinery, and official culture suddenly shudders into view, exposing at the same time how heterodox and fugitive attitudes can intercede and/or emerge from dominant methodological traditions within academic discourse by means of performative transversations: the invention of new articulatory spaces, new theoretical languages, and new speaking voices for a more challenging academic discourse.

The very language of Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* reveals its most important homological correspondence, one that still applies to certain sociopolitical conductors within state machineries today that constitute and preside over official avenues for academia and the arts: the position of Friar Bacon, whom we shall now call "B", within the "academic state" (2.165) finds its structural analogue in the position of the English King, whom we shall now refer to as simply "Henry," within the international political field. Because of this homological correspondence, the resolution of the different levels of political conflict require a convergence between these two figures and their symmetrical positioning – at the end of the play – at the apex of their respective fields of power. Consequently, England's position in relation to other international states is structurally analogous to other scales of

relationship, such as the position of the University of Oxford in relation to the national political field of England and Brazennose College's position in relation to the University "state" at large; thus B's relationship to other academic potentates may be directly correlated with that of Henry in relation to the Emperor who visits Oxford with him. This homology finds expression in the defensive analogies that both Henry and B employ: England, Henry declares, is "ringed with the walls of old Oceanus" (4.2), much the way B proposes to "circle England round with brass" (2.172); the rich intellectual capital of the schools is described in terms of royal forests and landscapes, "fat and fallow deer" (9.4), and so forth.

But it is important to emphasize that, as a heuristic category, the principle of homology demonstrates not only correspondence, but also the tension, friction, and contestation that inevitably exist between social fields with different and often conflicting currencies of value; indeed, we may suspect that as homological alignments become increasingly triumphant in their representation, so also increases the degree of conflict, according to the principle of pressurized belongings, that potentially resides in their conjunction. Whatever the extravagance of Henry's rhetoric, B's research program in fact belies Henry's claims for England's natural sovereignty. As the Armada crisis had recently showed, the protection afforded by the seas could no longer be taken for granted, and a mysterious power, imagined in theological, magical, or technological terms, had to be invented as its supplement. The breath of God blowing to founder the Spanish navy, a wall of brass compassing all of England: both are early modern avatars of late-modern fears, and of the settlement bulwarks and missile shields designed to dispel them. For B to be powerful, in short, England must appear to be in a state of insufficiency, and for this reason, Henry needs to *expose* B to the threat of Vandermast as much as he needs him to vanquish that threat, if only to remind him of the benefits of royal protection. For the same reason, he needs to supervise their disputation as an authorizing witness, crucially performing the "witness-function" in the hermeneutic equation (see Chapter 7), to the contest and as the guarantor of B's enduring reputation and affective presence. By doing so, furthermore, Henry manages to accomplish a contradictory goal with a single dialectical gesture, marginalizing B in the very moment that he celebrates him. By commanding *homo academicus* to demonstrate his ability, Henry transforms years of scholarship and research into a momentary, spectacular performance whose power is symbolic rather than material: not a physical transformation of sub-

stance or the erection of a technological marvel, but arcane words and arguments that no one but B and Vandermast, locked in a titanic struggle for their own anachronism, understand.

But – by virtue of homology and citationality – is not "Vandermast" simply another Henry in this scene, which reflects the common critique of academic discourse today, particularly when enhanced by the language of theory? It is a critique that often rears its head within the very system of which it is mutually symptomatic; and so the scene becomes its own delightful theater, staging the becomings and comings-to-be of *homo academicus* in relation to the communities he needs to both engender and defy in order to survive and replicate. In the play (but is this just a play we are discussing? for B is certainly in the theater, yet he is also in the text), B himself is under attack – and more vulnerably so because he does not have the support of a community of which he is a devoted member – not simply by Vandermast but by rivals from within his own field, much the way Henry's authority is hedged not simply by foreign rivals but by competing intra-national sociopolitical conductors of such institutions as the University and the Church; in this field, too, the very singularity that makes B so powerful – the only and last defense of both England and the "academic state" (2.165) – is what makes him threatening to the hierarchy within the university community as well as to Henry; his transversality, unique and affective, cannot be effectively contained or channeled. The University and the Church, too, attend the disputation and have no less of an investment in the resolution of "the doubtful question," as Vandermast describes it (9.23). Here the stakes are nothing less than the authorization of an entire research program: a set of problems, techniques, and goals; a specialized vocabulary; a canon of textual authorities. The entire play, in fact, provides a perfect demonstration of the attempt to formulate a scientific paradigm, in Thomas Kuhn's terms, and to define the terms in which the legitimacy of that paradigm might be recognized and its symbolic power secured. The real importance of the "Brazen Head" resides in its symbolic status as a catalyst for dissective-cohesive aspirations that must give way to investigative-expansive processes: in the epigrammatic formula of its pronouncements, signifiers of a larger and more mysterious potential power to transform all things; in its status as an exemplary construction, a model project that B may wield in order to legitimate his theoretical paradigm, demonstrate competence, promise success in future endeavors, and receive material support; and, not least, in its metonymical name, the "Brazen Head" that will secure the reputation of "Brazennose College" within the university, national, and

international communities, and secure B's place at the center – as a key sociopolitical conductor with extraordinary "emulative authority" (see Chapter 1) – of the cascading homological series.

In this respect, the Brazen Head is simply a spectacular manifestation of B's occult powers, of expanding subjective and official territories, and thus of the changing status of mathematics, technology, and the mechanical arts that was taking place in early modern England during the final third of the sixteenth century, both inside the university and outside it, largely through the efforts of "inventive" academic subjects like John Dee, Gabriel Harvey, Blundeville, Harriott, Sir Henry Savile, and many others. As a result, Dee, in his famous "Mathematical Praeface" to Henry Billingsley's English translation of Euclid's *Elements* (1570), could claim for "*mathesis*" a variety of philosophical, theological, technological, and occult properties, much the way B's "magic" and "mathematic rules" exist in an expanding rhizome of knowledge-practices that include astronomy, navigation ("tides and ebbs"), necromancy, pyromancy, and aeromancy. Through a transversal act of historical imagination, Greene has retrojected contemporary developments in mathematics into a romanticized, medieval past, drawing on the longstanding tradition of proto-scientific inquiry at Oxford as a way of legitimizing his own *alma mater* while also preserving a certain skeptical and amused distance. The Brazen Head, after all, finally proves useless, a ridiculous stage effect, and in this way Greene is, like Henry, asserting the superiority of his own specialized language – poetics and dramatic representation – over the spurious incantations of B's device.[3]

In doing so, however, Greene (like B) also dramatizes a contradiction that is fundamental to all academic research and to every academic utterance, which results from its position at the point of intersection between two competing fields. To the power of the King, official culture, and state machinery – of any force that works in the interest of coherence – the academic utterance must retain a reserve of authority that can fund this power's initiatives, even as these remain entirely distinct from, and often in direct contradiction to, the academic research necessary to produce further authoritative utterances. State power, in short, must cultivate "science" for rhetorical purposes even as it circumscribes it with separate gestures calculated to undercut it and ensure its final impotence and irrelevance outside its own immediate field. To this end, state power inflates the currency of academic prestige within the "official" territory of academe and fosters vigorous competition over the few resources that it allocates, in this way ensuring that the currency of

any stature within the academic field will be achieved at enormous personal and material cost, restricted to an extreme minority, and remain difficult to convert into any form of power, symbolic, transversal, or otherwise, outside of the academic field that defines it.

This inhibiting dynamic – state power's ability to "divide and conquer" – explains why B can occupy such a marginalized position in the academic system and yet play such a central and singular symbolic role in the defense of the academic field; why he occupies a poor single cell, employs a foolish research assistant, eats meager meals, embarks on exhausting and ultimately fruitless projects, and yet still manages to espouse a secret, specialized form of knowledge that fascinates and provokes competitive rivalry and anxiety from his colleagues and garners extravagant praise, but only praise, from Henry at the end of the play. In the play, recognition is indeed the primary currency of the "academic state" (2.165), and remains the only meal ticket of *homo academicus*; B, after all, needs the recognition of his colleagues as much as they, as a collective body, need the national and international recognition that his triumph over Vandermast before Henry and foreign potentates brings. The purpose of Friar Bungay, B's inferior double-*cum*-collaborator (again, another Henry in this scene), is to represent in a particularly compressed way the intra-collegial relationships that are the consequence of the larger relationship between the academic field and the complex social network over which state power strives to reign. As exemplified by B and Bungay's relationship, "collegiality" consists in a competitive dependency structured by the threat of humiliation, a peculiar combination of solicitude and secrecy that characterizes conversations among near-equals, in disingenuous declarations of solidarity and gratitude, all in the interest of achieving the affective presence and emulative authority requisite for the maintenance of position. It is a world of pressurized belongings that notable university men such as Harvey, Greene, and Nashe must have known all-too-well; for all three it provided a resource of spleen that spilled over into their public satires and may even have goaded all three, to different degrees, to a seek an alternative position outside of the academic field in the market of commercial publication. Had the three men engaged in performative transversations, becoming an emergent community within the academic and/or commercial fields, as many of their contemporaries did, then they may have been more effective at fostering *homo academicus* – not in its fantasized singularity, but rather as a member of a community of friars, professors, mathematicians, magicians, astrologers, adepts, and students who would more appropriately find

homology in the theater. As figures for both B and Henry, we are pointing toward an academic culture that sees performance as its first principle – the research, formulation, dialogue, expression, and teaching of ideas and art – on which all collaboration depends and to which academic discourse should aspire.

Notes

1. See Reynolds and Turner, "From *Homo Academicus* to *Poeta Publicus*: Celebrity and Transversal Knowledge in Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c. 1589)," in Edward Gieskes and Kirk Melnikoff eds., *Writing Robert Greene: New Essays on England's First Professional Writer* (New York: Ashgate, forthcoming 2006.).
2. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," trans. Richard Nice in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. and introduction by Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 29–73.
3. On the homologies between Greene and Bacon, playwright and *homo academicus*, see Reynolds and Turner, "From *Homo Academicus* to *Poeta Publicus*: Celebrity and Transversal Knowledge in Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c. 1589)."

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