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Nicholas K. Kupensky  
*Bucknell University*

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# Death of the Scholar? The Transfer of Knowledge in the Undergraduate University: A Preface

*Nicholas K. Kupensky  
Bucknell University*

*The book is not repeatable in its “identity”: each reading of the book produces a simulacrum of an “original” that is itself the mark of the shifting and unstable subject. . . . Any preface commemorates that difference in identity by inserting itself between two readings—in our case, my reading (given of course that my language and I are shifting and unstable), my rereading, my rearranging of the text—and your reading. . . . The preface, by daring to repeat the book and reconstitute it in another register, merely enacts what is already the case: the book’s repetitions are always other than the book. There is, in fact, no “book” other than these ever-different repetitions: the “book” in other words, is always already a “text,” constituted by the play of identity and difference. (xii)*

—Gayatri Spivak, Translator’s Preface to *Of Grammatology*

As I meditated upon the necessity for this collection to begin with a preface, I found myself returning again and again to Gayatri Spivak’s remarks in her Translator’s Preface to Jacques Derrida’s *Of*

*Grammatology* (1976). Spivak situates her reading and representation of Derrida's text by deconstructing the idea of a preface, using Derrida's son/seed metaphor to set up a son/father = preface/text equation. Spivak explains that during a successful preface "the son or seed (preface or word), caused or engendered by the father (text or meaning) is recovered by the father and thus justified" (xi); yet, she writes:

Within this structural metaphor, Derrida's cry is "dissemination," the seed that neither inseminates nor is recovered by the father, but is scattered abroad. And he makes room for the prefatory gesture in quite another way: The preface is a necessary gesture of homage and parricide, for the book (the father) makes a claim of authority or origin which is both true and false. (Ibid)

Spivak sheds lights on the multiplicity of readings and rereadings that a text generates, and it is in this "play of identity and difference" that our sense of the book as a premeditated, authorized object gives way to the dialogic, shifting identity of the text. It is on this line of reasoning that I wish to make some prefatory remarks to the following essays, for it is necessary to say a few things before the reader encounters this collection of essays written by a group of individuals only embarking on the path into the academy.

The essays included in this collection all were written by students enrolled in undergraduate colleges and universities. We have collected the written assignments of coursework in the humanities, products of supervised or independent research, and revised chapters of theses, each of which was produced by a student negotiating the newness of a text studied for the first time with the desire to possess some "authorized" knowledge about their subject. The Comparative Humanities Review was created to support, promote, and distribute undergraduate scholarship in the humanities, and one of the unique issues that the existence of a publication of undergraduate essays raises is what exactly is undergraduate scholarship?

Indeed, the very notion of a Student-Scholar seems to be a contradiction in terms. One Ivy League graduate school calls the Ph.D. dissertation "a substantial independent piece of research which heralds your transformation from a consumer to a producer of knowledge." If we extend Spivak's and Derrida's structural metaphor, we can easily create a constellation of son/father = preface/text = consumer/producer, the quality distinguishing the last set of terms being the knowledge authorized during the experience of writing a doctoral dissertation. Without the scholarly hardware of our professors, we undergraduates are forced to reconcile our status as children, as "consumers" of knowledge, left wondering

what exactly our essays, presentations, and theses are? What type of readings do we generate, and if our readings are not yet authorized as scholarship, criticism, or knowledge by professional standards, is there a location for undergraduate readings of texts to reside? Perhaps a more honest question, if we take Spivak's contention that "There is, in fact, no 'book' other than these ever-different repetitions," can the undergraduate readings of humanistic texts be treated with a similar seriousness as any other reading? Furthermore, can the act of not publishing in professional, peer-reviewed journals in order to find the space to examine our own voice and our own unique subjectivity as Undergraduates be seen in the same terms as the simultaneous act of homage and parricide? These are a few of the questions that the Comparative Humanities Review hopes to entertain with our debut issue, *Conversation/Conversion*.

In lieu of the exploration, exhibition, and celebration of undergraduate scholarship, we have chosen to play on the common root of "converse" and "convert" entertaining the belief that by supporting undergraduate conversation in the humanities, we are helping undergraduates convert from Student to Scholar, a distinction that one cannot entirely dismiss in the "publish or perish" academy.

Our aim is not to illegitimize the academy nor de-authorize academics per se, but shine light brightly on the problematic moment in which know-nothing Students transition into all-knowing Scholars. That is to say, our undergraduate years combine the humble realization that what we know pales in comparison to seasoned professors – who often have been meditating on a given subject longer than we undergraduates have been alive – with the potential for free-thinking and creativity that exists in its purest form before the institutionalization, professionalization, and commodification of knowledge begins. We are not yet professors, so the articles contained in this issue do not claim to "profess" anything. What we hope to do is share our readings, exhaust our ideas, and explore inklings, approaches, and topics that we might not be able to explore once tenure, review, and promotions become part of our everyday lexicon.

That said, by professional scholarly standards, the following essays are incomplete, under-developed, and subject to the critiques and criticism of experienced intellectuals; yet, this first collection of essays, by bringing together the intellectual contributions of thirteen students in the United States and Canada, allows us to better assess who we are, what we know, and how we have come to know it.

We open this collection with four exceptional pieces of research, beginning with Michelle Toumayants' article "Poetic Proverbs, African Advocacy, and Melvin B. Tolson." Toumayants traces how the African poet Melvin B. Tolson infuses his powerful yet fragmented modernist poetry with the wisdom of African proverbs as a means of reaching the masses.

Marcus Ladd's extensive research into clarifying the existence of a historical King Arthur is a welcome contribution, and his "Recovering the Historical Arthur" is a finely-crafted example of undergraduate research.

Graham Bippart's essay "The Spirit of Prospero: Fiction and Identity in Georges Poulet's *Phenomenology of Reading*" explicates Poulet's theory of reading, illuminating Poulet with aspects of the thought of Beckett, Barthes, Blanchot, Sartre, and Nietzsche. Bippart writes that Poulet approaches "the act of reading to be a confluence of minds," which offers a number of perspectives from which one can read this collection as well.

We have included a condensed version of Gordon Purves' undergraduate honors thesis in which he develops his critique against the phenomenological and ontological trends in modern Western philosophy, developing his own methodology of falsificationist realism.

The undergraduate writers collected in this edition are perhaps the first generation of scholars raised on video games, and consequently we have two very provocative essays emerging from two students of philosophy at Youngstown State University. Josh Taylor brings the philosophy of Robert Nozick to the virtual worlds created by video games in his essay that examines "gamers" as theoretical participants in Nozick's Experience Machine. While Taylor explores the text of the virtual world, fellow classmate Chad Miller uses the language and tools of anthropology to locate the video-gamer within multiple realities, temporal and virtual. In his article "A Short-Term Ethnographic Study of a Popular Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game," Miller studied two students (Josh Taylor and Andi Bok) and the relationship to the game World of Warcraft.

Nicole Vesa in her article "Overthrowing Optimistic Emerson: Edgar Allen Poe's Aim to Horrify" examines how Poe departed from Emerson's aesthetic through his use of horror.

Next, Anna Juan in her article "Mind Over Matter, Matter Over Mind: Phallusophy and Diotima" gives a reading of Plato's *Symposium* that reveals how Diotima, the text's only woman, uses active and passive sexuality to subvert the reign of the phallus.

In her article "Distinct Cultures Create Similar Themes: A Study of Langston Hughes and Cathy Song's Poetry," Marie Vivienne Pineda med-

itates on how Hughes and Song similarly work through questions of identity, rebellion, and being an American in their poetry.

Finally, if there is one anxiety that each of these authors have faced, it is the anxiety of publishing; Daylin Oakes in her article “Darwin as a Humble Revolutionary” examines Charles Darwin’s biography and his own questions about the authority of his discoveries.

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On behalf of the editorial board of the Comparative Humanities Review, it is my sincere hope that our readers come away from this collection with the feeling of pleasure, that your responses will become part of the larger conversation on undergraduate scholarship in the humanities, and that these essays provoke you to send us your thoughts as well. Thank you for reading.

### ***Works Cited***

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Translator’s Preface.” In Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976.