

**CRITIQUING THE CAMPUS: ACADEMIC PRACTICE  
AS LITERARY SUBJECT IN THE CONTEMPORARY  
UNIVERSITY NOVEL**

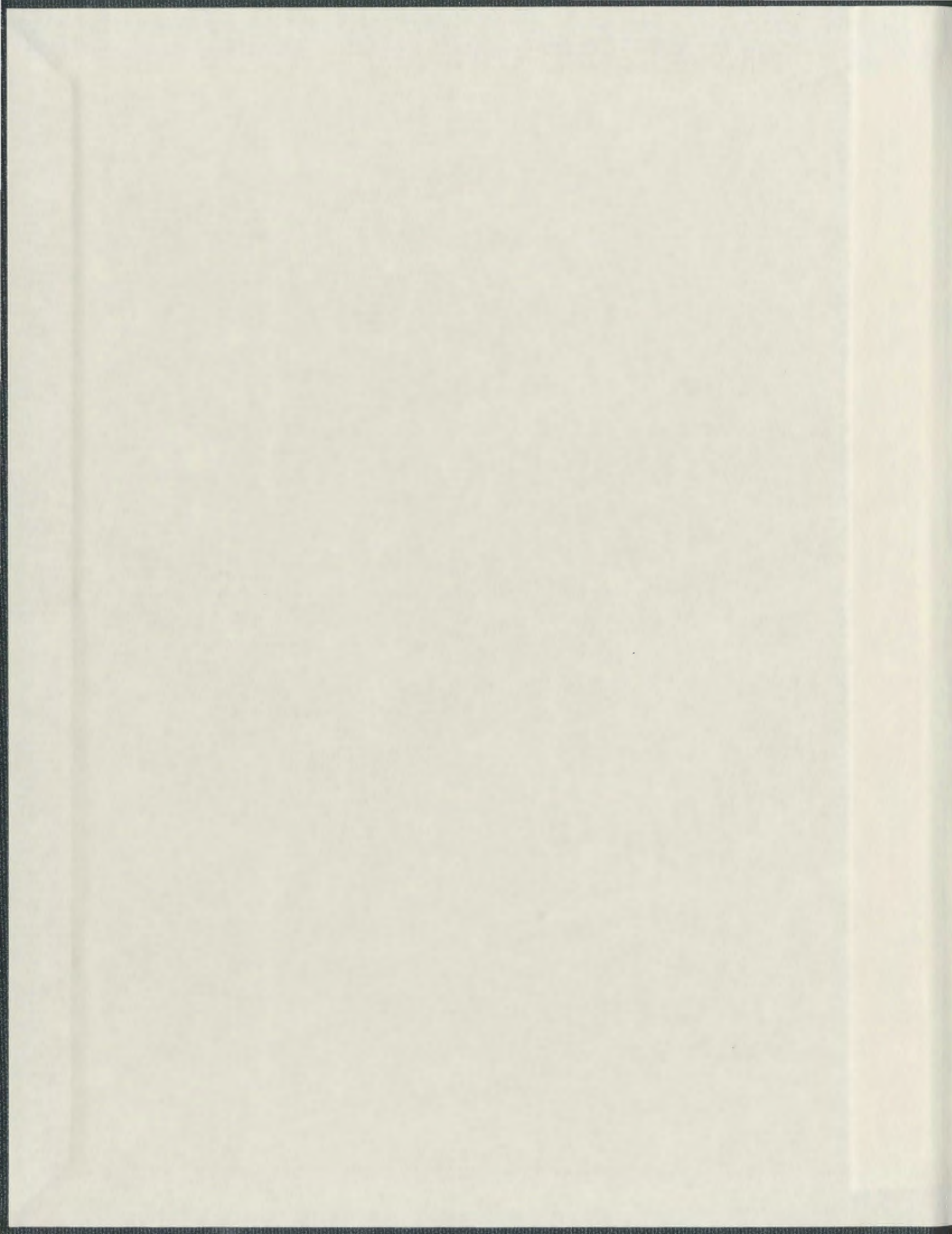
**CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES**

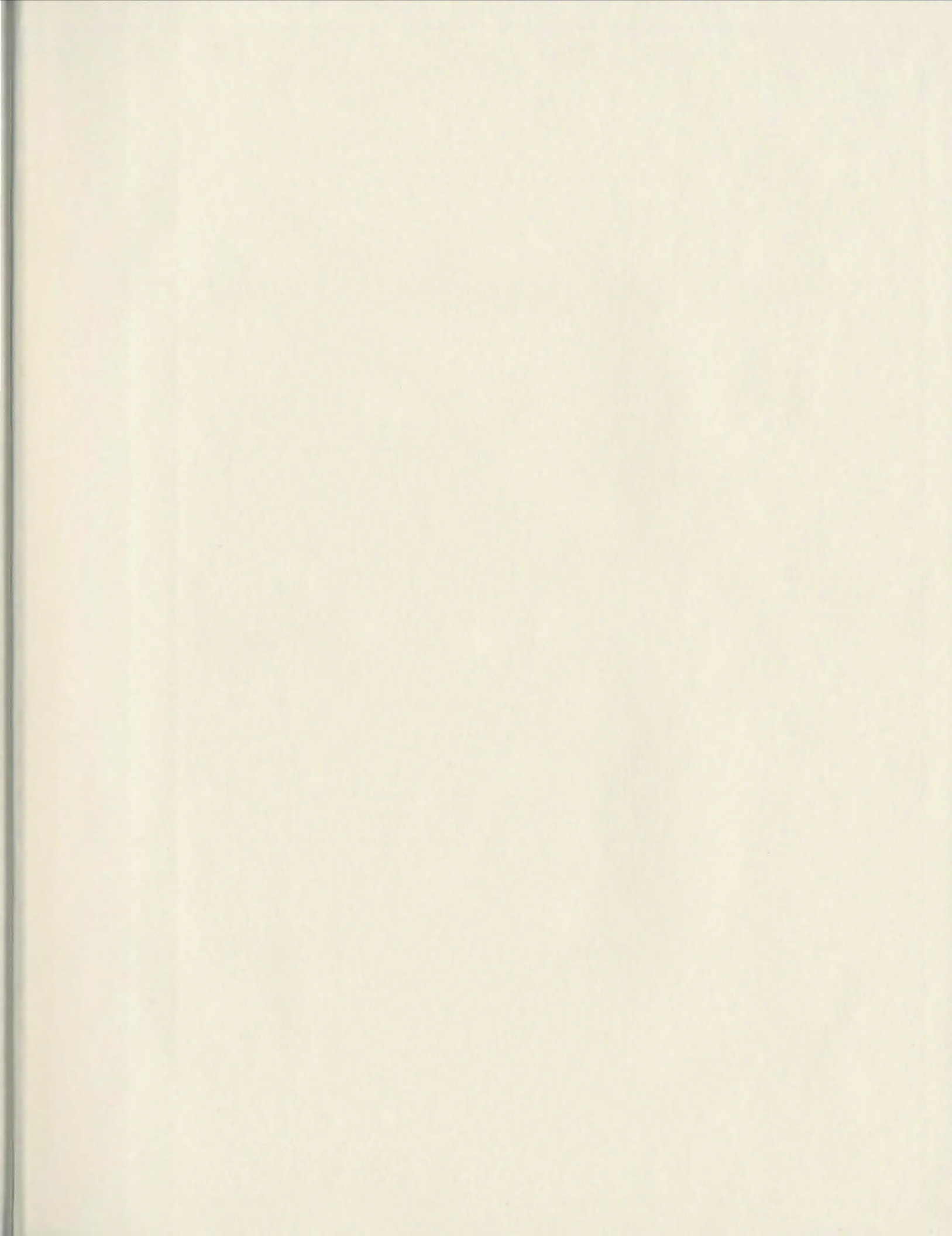
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**MEGHAN DIMMICK**







**CRITIQUING THE CAMPUS: ACADEMIC PRACTICE AS LITERARY  
SUBJECT IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY NOVEL**

by

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Dedication

The contemporary university novel is uniquely situated to observe and respond to the current state of crisis widely acknowledged and discussed throughout the university community, and it is capable of offering a considered and credible critique on the function, the value and the purpose of the university. The unique nature of this critique has caused it often to be discredited; in this study, these novels are examined in order to find, instead, what they may contribute.

To date, the major studies of the university novel have been comprehensive in scope and bibliographical in effect. My study, as a result, is able to assume the existence of the sub-genre and focus on a very select group of novels to show that they constitute a viable mode of academic critique, where academic practice becomes the target, rather than the producer, of extended criticism. Indeed, the sometimes unflattering representations of the university to be found in university novels amount to a coherent and pervasive fictional inquiry into the nature and function of academic practice.

To prove this, I briefly examine the recent boom in scholarly examinations of the current state of the university in order to establish a background for the positions the novelists explore in their books. Alvin Kernan, Robert Lecker, Bill Readings and Robert Scholes (to name a few) have all recently written on the current "crisis" in the university. Their books locate a corresponding response inside the university community (to the issues raised in the novels) and prove that the novels, like the non-fiction, are positing viable critical responses to important questions concerning the state of the university.

To examine these responses, I identify core images in a very select and contemporary group of novels. The conflicts between competition and idealism, corporation and community, uncertainty and truth, the creative critic and the creative artist, and solitude and civility are issues found in the novels and critical studies alike and provide the structure for my project. The novels include A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, Malcolm Bradbury's *Mensonge*, Michael Frayn's *The Trick of It*, Christine Brooke-Rose's *Textermination*, David Lodge's *Nice Work*, Richard Russo's *The Straight Man*, Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring*, Robert Grudin's *Book*, Jane Smiley's *Moo* and Carol Shields' *Swann*.

What these novels have in common is most interestingly a clear sense of the value and purpose of the study of literature, of education and of the university. In the non-fiction works written on the state of the university, it is widely held that we are losing or have lost touch with the university's value and purpose, but the university novel posits a clear sense of idealism. This sense of idealism and possibility marks an important, often unremarked, evolution in the sub-genre and it is suggestive of the ultimate value of the university novel as a unique means of access to the preoccupations and anxieties of a community in crisis.

## Dedication

For my mum and dad and for Lewis.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the financial support of the School of Graduate Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Larry Mathews for his active support and helpful criticism in each stage of this project. I would also like to thank Dr. William Barker for his energetic responses.



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## Critiquing the Campus: Academic Practice as Literary Subject in the Contemporary University Novel

### A Brief History of the Contemporary University Novel<sup>1</sup>

The university novel as we now know it came fully into being sometime shortly after the Second World War. Novels such as C.P. Snow's *The Light and the Dark* (1947) and *The Masters* (1951), Mary McCarthy's *Groves of Academe* (1952) and Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954) were instrumental in establishing the modern tradition of this unique sub-genre. Before that, in the late eighteenth and earlier half of the nineteenth century, academic fiction by and large represented the university in a much more idyllic light, often centring upon the nostalgic recollections of former students who had a tendency to identify the university with the questing innocence and exuberance of youth and who courted fond memories of daft dons and witty professors. Novels such as Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1885) and Compton MacKenzie's *Sinister Street* (1913-4) set the standard for this kind of depiction and determined the larger course for the university novel for decades after their publication.

Richard Sheppard, in his study of the "fictional vilification of the learned" (18) over the last two hundred years, identifies this earlier period in the history of the university novel as a time of relative confidence and security in the relationship between the society at large and the university itself. He notes that,

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<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive history, the studies mentioned herein by Proctor, Lyons, Carter and Rossen are invaluable.

Because of th[e] sense of secure establishment, centrality and divine ordination [experienced at this time], the dons and undergraduates who populated fictional Oxbridge between *Sinister Street* and the mid-1950s were accorded either a respect...or a good-humoured licence...which would become increasingly impossible after the publication of *Lucky Jim*.

(35)

Sheppard makes it clear that, after *Lucky Jim*, the university novel changed importantly in specific response to the changing image of the university as a social institution. When the university was believed to be representative of society and a locus of culture, when it was commonly (even though perhaps, still, only ideally) accepted that the university was staffed with teachers experienced in all the best that had been thought and written, and trained men to be gentlemen, its place and purpose in the society was relatively secure.<sup>2</sup> But, as this sense of the university's means and purpose changed, the questions being directed at the university began to undermine, instead of reaffirm, its place. The result, in stark contrast to the earlier idealizations of the university, is *Lucky Jim*, a novel that is frankly disapproving, at times, even vitriolic, in its criticism of the academy. *Lucky Jim* is a fair representative of the clear movement away from the more positive depictions of campus life typical in the earlier half of the century. Indeed, it is generally accepted that at this time "the fashion for novels about politely amusing campus high jinks comes to an end" (Lyons 68), and that, after the Second World War, one "no longer... find[s] novels

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<sup>2</sup> Although the university may have enjoyed a more secure position in the society at this time, clearly, it was only important in, and representative of, the lives of the upper-class men who had access to it. It is, in part, the changing notion of the use of the university that upset this security.



extolling the beneficent effects of existence among the dreaming spires" (Proctor 180).<sup>3</sup> Instead, the university novel begins to question the merit and function of the university, and from the soft haze of sentimental reminiscence the university is pulled into a much sharper, and a much more critical, focus, such that,

...the latter-half of the 1960s was to see the beginning of a growing chorus of criticism that became increasingly bitter...The indictment of the entire university experience, projected by more than one hundred novels [from the 1960s to the 1980s]...is painfully exhaustive...and it is an indictment which continues to this day. (Bevan 102)

However, while the criticism of the university that distinguishes contemporary academic fiction from its most immediate predecessors is certainly *more* embittered and *more* exhaustive than it generally was previously, it is a mistake to dismiss this development of the sub-genre as a simple regression into personal invective and antagonistic complaint. For the shift in tone from the sentimental to the critical is, also, and notably, accompanied by a general perspective shift that has allowed for an important development in the sub-genre. In the earlier twentieth century novels, the university experience tended to be explored through the eyes of a student, either present or past. Currently, this tendency has been almost completely reversed and contemporary university novels generally are told from the perspective of a professor, as an, at least

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<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) stands out perhaps as an exception at this time for its use of the university as a specifically idealized place, one that is characterized by the youthful exuberance of its students and by their invigorating freedom from the pressures of the real world. But Waugh seems to be hearkening back to earlier representations of the university just as his main character is hearkening back to an earlier time. The new mood of the university novel, as represented by Snow, McCarthy and Amis, is

potentially, more permanent member of the university. This is an important shift because it allows the university novel to become less simply a novel of initiation or nostalgic recollection and more a novel about the process, the value, and the purpose of post-secondary education. While this makes room for the kind of vicious complaint to be found in Amis' *Lucky Jim* or the sense of cynical disillusionment one experiences in Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975), it also allows for the much more careful, critical examination of the workings of the university found, for example, in Snow's *Strangers and Brothers* series (1947-1971). Ultimately, this shift, far from being regressive, has the potential to encourage "the university novel [to]...overcome the handicaps and limitations inherent in its subject matter" (Proctor 190) and cause it to deal with the real questions that face the academic community. Thus, the current university novel is in a position to ask the questions that are most pressing both inside and outside the university itself, namely, "What are the ends of a university education? Or even more broadly, What is a university?" (Proctor 190).

In England and the United States particularly, the lure of these questions has caused the sub-genre of the university novel to flourish, and writers like J.I.M. Stewart, Barbara Pym, and Tom Sharpe, in Britain, and Alison Lurie, Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow, in the States, have all turned their hand to the writing of academic fiction.<sup>4</sup> In

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characterized by a much more realistic tone, in its closer critical look at the workings of the contemporary university.

<sup>4</sup> J.I.M. Stewart (who also wrote under the name Michael Innes) wrote upwards of twenty novels that deal to varying degrees with the university. His last and arguably most accomplished university novel was *The Naylor's* (1985). Barbara Pym has also written several university novels, including *No Fond Return of Love* (1961) and *An Academic Question* (1986), while Tom Sharpe's academic satires include *Porterhouse Blue* (1974) and *The Wilt Alternative* (1979). For the Americans, Alison Lurie is most readily identified as a university novelist with novels like *Love and Friendship* (1962), *The War Between the Tates* (1974) and *Foreign Affairs* (1984). Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1957) and *Pale Fire* (1962) are often cited as among the

Canada, the sub-genre has been slower to catch on. Robertson Davies' 1982 novel *Rebel Angels*, Carol Shields' 1987 novel *Swann* (which will be treated at length in Chapters One and Four) and John Kenneth Galbraith's novel *The Tenured Professor* (1990) are the major examples of the Canadian university novel.<sup>5</sup> All these books add to a sub-genre that increasingly is attracting to its fold many of the most prestigious and best-known writers writing today. This, perhaps above all else, provides good reason to study the university novel, to provide an adequate critical response to the increased creative attention in the sub-genre.

#### A Brief Overview of Studies of the University Novel

To date, the major studies of the university novel have been comprehensive in scope and bibliographical in effect; their primary goal has been to prove that the university novel exists as a discernable and viable sub-genre. In essence, these studies have provided for the university novel both a definition and a history. These include four major books on the subject.<sup>6</sup> Mortimer R. Proctor documents the development of the British university novel, and John O. Lyons, documents the American. Ian Carter and

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best university novels while Saul Bellow's include *Herzog* (1964), *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) and *The Dean's December* (1982).

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, with regard to this relative scarcity, Memorial University has been the setting of two other Canadian university novels. Gildas Roberts wrote *Chemical Eric* in 1974 and Ishmael Baksh's book *Black Light* was written in 1988. Although notable, these books, along with Sean Kane's *Virtual Freedom* (1998), were not considered in this study because of my desire to use novels that could have conceivably influenced general debate on the state of the university and stand as notable representatives of the current status of the university novel. Because of their local publication and limited runs, these novels did not get the distribution necessary to fulfill these standards.

<sup>6</sup> This excludes Susan J. Leonardi's work *Dangerous by Degrees* (1989) which focuses more specifically on the figure of the educated woman in a select group of novels, and the book *University Fiction* edited by David Bevan. *University Fiction*, although itself a notable study, does not belong with the major studies of the sub-genre because, as a series of articles, it does not achieve the same level of intensity or focus.



Janice Rossen have written more recent studies that are scaled down somewhat in scope. Carter picks up where Proctor leaves off and discusses the British university novel in the years from 1945 to 1988, while Rossen, in the most recent and selective study, discusses a wide variety of twentieth-century British university novels (as well as some American examples) privileging, for the first time, recurring "trends" over an all-inclusive history.

The success of the above projects makes my own study both possible and necessary. Their efforts have made it possible for me to *assume* the existence of the sub-genre in order to focus on a very select group of novels to show that these works of fiction constitute a viable mode of academic critique, where academic practice becomes the target, rather than the producer, of extended criticism. In my study, I address the fictional representation of academic practice in several recent university novels from Canada, the U.S. and England with a specific critical (rather than historical or bibliographical) aim in mind. My study explores *what* the university novel does as a sub-genre, and, what recent university novels offer is in many ways unique and still largely unexplored. Indeed, my study reveals that the specific merit of university fiction has been often obscured by the all-inclusive, bibliographic histories, that, while necessary, have, by their very nature, tended to minimize, rather than stress, the importance of several significant novels within the sub-genre.

This is in no way meant to diminish the studies done thus far, for their contribution has been invaluable in documenting the history and existence of the university novel and for offering a clear invitation for further study. In his groundbreaking book, Mortimer R. Proctor (1957) studies the development of the English

university novel from 1749 to the 1950s in order to, in part, identify what he ascertains as the increasing merit of academic fiction in its attempt to come to terms with the question "What is a university?" (190). John O. Lyons (1968) accomplishes something similar for what he identifies as the "serious"<sup>7</sup> American university novel in his study which begins with Hawthorne's *Fanshawe* (1828) and extends to include more contemporary novels such as Alison Lurie's *Love and Friendship* (1962). Both books' predominant motivation is historical, and therefore they are primarily chronological and comprehensive studies of the sub-genre. Because of this policy of inclusion, however, both critics find cause to complain about the poor quality of much of the fiction they cover. They remark on the sameness of the novels, though Lyons admits that "no doubt a survey of any similar niche of literature would find as little of real merit" (186). Nonetheless, it seems that for a long while these comprehensive histories might have worked more effectively to discourage rather than encourage interest in the university novel; there are no other major studies until Ian Carter's in 1990. After more than thirty years, Carter's study of British university fiction must provide a rather extensive historical survey of its own, and, though he limits his time span to the post-war period, his study is still quite far-reaching in scope. This causes him to become similarly unimpressed with the quality of much that he reads. He concludes with some impatience that "the awful truth" revealed to him over the course of his study is that "despite their apparent diversity, almost all British university novels

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<sup>7</sup> Curiously (particularly in a sub-genre that tends toward the satiric), Lyons excludes juvenile, mystery and comic novels on "the grounds of frivolity" (xviii).

play modest variations on one of [only] three linked stories" (15).<sup>8</sup> This is reductive, and is, again, not a clear enticement for further study, but Carter's book remains very useful as it marks an important development in the study of the university novel, which is, that for the first time, Carter examines "the British university novel as discourse" (10). He examines the influence of the university novel on the popular imagination and concludes that their often unfavourable depictions of the university since the Second World War have contributed to the hostile political and public attitudes that resulted in the "Thatcher government's emasculation of British higher education" (14). Despite the sinister implications of this rather dramatic conclusion, Carter's statement acknowledges here the clear significance of the university novel (frequently maligned as trivial and petty) in important cultural developments. Far from being unimportant, the university novel, Carter claims, has helped to direct a major nation's educational policy. Thus, Carter enhances Proctor's claim that university novels have the ability to "document" the university (185) by suggesting that the university novel has the ability to *affect* the university, to shape what the university looks like. This is significant as it initiates an even more direct and, I think, productive discussion about what the university novel represents, how it represents what it represents, and, finally, the cultural and critical ramifications of these representations.

Janice Rossen (1993) also focuses on twentieth-century novels, primarily British, although she discusses some American exceptions. Her study is significantly different from those previous, however, as it attempts to "isolate important trends in academic

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<sup>8</sup> They are: "how an undergraduate at Oxford (usually) or Cambridge [comes] to wisdom, how a don at



fiction" (7). Her emphasis is primarily analytical and, as a result, her study is necessarily less exhaustive and thus more focused. Using a sampling of approximately fifty novels, Rossen is able to discuss some of the texts more extensively as she establishes a coherent framework for the novels that acknowledges and reveals some of their complexity rather than simply dismissing their "sameness." It is also notable that Rossen sees fit to include some American novels in order to explore "the international scope of scholarship" (7). A sense of the "global campus" is increasingly evident in recent university fiction and Rossen's move to reflect this in her study introduces the possibility that university fiction might be among the first non-critical (in the traditional sense) responses to unify and express the experiences of academic life.

My project is born quite naturally out of these previous works in that it relies on the existence and the relevance of the sub-genre, and becomes necessary as a logical extension of the work done thus far. Most importantly, it provides focus by concentrating on a select group of novels and, by so doing, provides specificity in place of previous generalizations. Thus, I am able to accomplish something unique in the study of the sub-genre. By being selective, I am able to present the university novel as not only a viable sub-genre in terms of scope, but in terms of quality.

In fact, my focus reveals that the "sameness" bemoaned by Proctor, Lyons and Carter is not a cause for the dismissal of university fiction but for a more intense investigation. In the view of this study, the similarities to be found in these novels do not reflect a lack of imagination or subtlety; rather, they identify the essential and pervasive

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Oxford (usually) or Cambridge [is] stabbed in the back physically or professionally...and how rotten life

crises of the university. These crises are the inevitable result of the clash between what people hope for and what they encounter, between their ideals and their realities. Indeed, recurrent fictional representations are generally used to *validate* rather than invalidate critical inquiry. In examining a repeating phenomenon, I take my cue from several highly influential critical approaches; just as feminists use the similarities in fictional portrayals of women to prove the merit of their claims and the seriousness of their projects, I seek to show that any "sameness" in the university novels I address simply highlights the significance of the problems they are addressing. As feminist thought has clearly shown, the repetitive nature of fictional representation generally points to pervasive problems that exist in the *subject* of literary enquiry, not in the literary product itself. John Schellenberger recognizes this in his 1982 article "University fiction and the university crisis." He explains, "the fact that the picture they each give is to a large extent the *same* picture demonstrates that it must be a faithful depiction of the mood of, at least, a significant element amongst the staff of Britain's universities" (45). David Bevan also affirms that this sameness should be the cause for increased attention, instead of grounds for dismissal, in his article, "Images of Our Tottering Tower: The Academic Novel As A Metaphor For Our Times." Bevan asserts that what can be identified as the general mood of contemporary academic fiction is ultimately and importantly revealing. He writes,

Deformation, divination, desecration or, arguably...damnation--the nuances are considerable, but there may well remain certain core images, insistent and persistent, in the disturbing hall of mirrors constituted by that

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[is] as student or teacher outside Oxford or Cambridge" (Carter 15).

emergent genre, or rather sub-genre, of the last thirty years: the academic novel. (101)

This study of the university novel identifies some of these core images in a very select and contemporary group of novels in order to discover the ways in which this unique sub-genre does, in fact, explore the current state of the university. Although some of the previous major studies have had a tendency to complain about the sameness of university novels, they ultimately join with critics like Schellenberger and Bevan in asserting that what is most valuable about certain examples of the sub-genre is their ability to offer a prolonged investigation into the nature of the university itself.<sup>9</sup> Proctor claims that "...the university novelist[s]...final achievement [amounts to] a profound exploration of the function and purpose of the university" (Proctor 10). He declares that university novels,

...have recorded, with surprising accuracy, the issues of reform, the temper of the reformers, and the astonishing changes they wrought, perhaps as accurately and certainly more vividly than could any memoir or official account. (Proctor 187)

Similarly, Sheppard acknowledges that

...the fictional presentation of academics and universities in Britain has... been more than the simple repetition of a negative stereotype or the continuing reflex of the learned. Rather, it has been a more or less

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<sup>9</sup> John Lyons stands as the exception here. While Carter amends his criticism of the sameness of most university novels by clarifying that the best of the sub-genre (which he locates almost exclusively in American examples) distinguish themselves by "tackl[ing] more issues, and in more interesting ways" (211), Lyons (ironically writing about the American fiction that Carter privileges above the British) maintains that "in all of these novels the authors tend to direct their satire at rather obvious evils and avoid offering alternatives" (163).

consciously encoded way of debating a complex issue [that]...has been a continuing matter of public concern: the place, nature and value of public education. (Sheppard 29)

The criticism of the university offered by university novels belies the sub-genre's stereotypical characterization as a series of comically-exaggerated send-ups, and it shows, upon examination, the degree to which the criticism of the university novelist extends beyond localized, idiosyncratic griping to the university community in a general sense. Indeed, the often unflattering representations of the university to be found in university novels amount to a coherent and pervasive fictional inquiry into the nature of academic practice. Thus, Bevan concludes his article by affirming that, although

Fictions they may be...such novels offer an oblique mirror which reveals and illuminates facets of the university experience that are, both professionally and existentially, challenging and pertinent...furnishing images of a world in turmoil... The relevance of the recent academic novel...seems to have become, therefore, fundamental. (Bevan 108)

The importance of this study lies in part in its ability to realize these claims by taking these principles and applying them to a study of specific university novels, thereby, demonstrating the extent to which fiction is capable of affecting the status and state of its subject, the university. For in the same way that feminism and post-colonialism have shown literature capable of exposing the mechanisms upon which a society rests and by which it is maintained, this study privileges fiction's unique ability to challenge the university community.

## Principles of Inclusion/Exclusion

In order to meet this challenge, I address the depiction of the university in countries on two separate continents, representing the majority of the English-speaking world, as this establishes that it is the university itself that is the subject in these novels and not, more simply, any single British, American or Canadian governmental policy.<sup>10</sup> This demonstrates that any "sameness" in the novels is not derived from a specific locality, but is evidence of something consistent in the university itself. In the interest of maintaining this international reach, while maintaining the desire to focus intensely on each individual novel, my scope is strongly delineated in terms of time rather than space. My use of current novels (the earliest discussed was published in 1987) provides this delineation.<sup>11</sup> This strict time limitation is made possible, and valuable, by the quality of the recent novels published by several highly respected contemporary writers, including Carol Shields, A.S. Byatt, and Ishmael Reed. These novels prove in themselves the literary possibilities (and probably the literary pedigree) of recent university fiction. However, and perhaps more importantly, the contemporary nature of my study is

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<sup>10</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the novels do not target local governmental policy in their depiction of the university, but that their criticism of the state of the university also, and importantly, engages a wider sense of the function of the university. This does not presuppose that the university is the same in all three countries, but that it has certain internal characteristics that distinguish it as an institution.

<sup>11</sup> The move out of the 1990s and back into the late 1980s is motivated by my desire to include a Canadian example of the sub-genre. Carol Shields' *Swann* is one of few Canadian university novels, and the only one that fits the parameters of my project; this prevents me from being able to provide a more proper balance among the three nations, but, in an attempt, somewhat, to redress this imbalance I consider *Swann* in two chapters in my project (while all the other novels are located specifically in only one chapter.) This is both a priority and a possibility in my intention to include in my study the Canadian university system (the university system in which I have been educated and in which this dissertation was conceived and written), and by the nature of Shields' novel itself. Shields' novel is divided into five distinct sections, two of which I study at length. Each of the sections of her novel deals with a different character's interaction with the poetry of Mary Swann, two of whom are scholars in the university community. This allows me to break the study of her novel into two clearly defined parts which correspond to two different chapters of my project,

necessary to emphasize the degree to which the university novel can persuasively consider and comment upon *current* academic practice, rather than provide a historical index of that practice; a contemporary focus is required to prove the immediate relevance of the sub-genre.<sup>12</sup>

Because my focus is specifically on the depiction of the university in these novels, I have also found it necessary to make careful delineations with regard to my definition of the university novel. In the more inclusive studies, the university novel is defined rather widely and incorporates all novels that include the university to any degree. In order that they function properly in my study, I include only novels that specifically, and extensively, *feature* the university. Thus, I study not simply the university novel since 1987, but the university as subject since 1987. As a result of this strict definition, current novels such as Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein* (1999) and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), which would all be considered university novels in the more general sense, are not applicable to my study because the university plays a relatively secondary role in the larger context of the novels. That is, although their characterizations and critiques of the university are interesting and evocative, they do not attempt the same degree of sustained criticism as the ten novels studied herein.<sup>13</sup>

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allowing a more representative coverage of her novel and an extended, if qualified, representation of the Canadian viewpoint.

<sup>12</sup> Because of their contemporary nature, there is also very little criticism to be found on these novels. *Straight Man*, *Japanese By Spring*, *Book*, *The Trick of It* and *Textermination* are virtually unexamined critically, while *Swann*, *Mensonge* and *Moo* have very little written on them. The exceptions are *Possession* and *Nice Work*, which have elicited more active, if limited, critical responses. I deal with the relevant criticism concerning each book in my examinations of them.

<sup>13</sup> I also exclude on this principle: Francine Prose's *Blue Angel* (2001), Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2001), James Hynes' novella *Casting the Runes* (in the collection *Publish and Perish*, 1997), Stanley Elkin's novella *Van Gogh's Room at Arles* (1993), Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992), Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris' *The Crown of Columbus* (1991) and Galbraith's *The Tenured Professor* (1990). These



So, to demonstrate that the university novel represents a serious challenge to the academic community and serious contemplation as to the purpose and function of the university, I address the university as subject on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel. I focus on recently published university novels which characterize the present state of academe, including, from England: A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1991), Malcolm Bradbury's *Mensonge* (1987), Michael Frayn's *The Trick of It* (1989), Christine Brooke-Rose's *Textermination* (1991) and David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988); from the U.S: Richard Russo's *The Straight Man* (1997), Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring* (1993), Robert Grudin's *Book* (1992) and Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995); and from Canada: Carol Shields' *Swann* (1987). These books are distinct examples of the university novel as they focus specifically and primarily on the university. In these novels, the university is the major setting;<sup>14</sup> it is the workplace and primary preoccupation of the major characters, and the function and purpose of the university serves as each novel's major subject.

### Organization

The framework of the argument takes its shape according to the pervasive critical issues raised in the fiction. Rather than centring each chapter on a novel, the chapters are organized around specific issues in the novels to emphasize the consistent and pervasive

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novels are important and several of them are even excellent examples of the wider application of the sub-genre. They also, though less extensively, deal with many of the themes common to the ten novels I discuss.

<sup>14</sup> I include *Textermination* here, for although its actual setting is a hotel in San Francisco, the hotel is the setting of the MLA conference, which stands in, I think reasonably, as a sort of satellite location of the university.

nature of the critiques they offer of academic practice. As such, my study organizes the novels into a coherently operating body of critical work at the same time it allows for a close examination of each individual text. The issues I have selected are those that recur most often in university fiction and in this select group of novels specifically. Not coincidentally, these are issues that have come into focus as those facing the university itself, as its members begin to question its role in contemporary society.

Each chapter, therefore, addresses itself to one of the major conflicts identified in the novels. In order, they are the conflicts between competition and idealism, corporation and community, uncertainty and truth, the creative critic and the creative artist, and solitude and civility.<sup>15</sup> In identifying these conflicts, I consciously use the term "and" to distinguish the various positions, instead of "versus" ("competition versus idealism"), because these positions are not necessarily in specific contrast to each other. Rather, the conflict between them is most often to be located in the argument over their spaces relative to each other, in arguing which side is to be privileged and to what degree. In each chapter, I deal with two novels (with *Swann* repeating in Chapter One and Four), with the exception of David Lodge's *Nice Work*, which appears in the conclusion alone. *Nice Work* receives this singular (if briefer) emphasis because of its ability to consolidate perhaps one of the most important elements of the other nine novels that are studied

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<sup>15</sup> As I have said, all these centre on major issues identified in the novels, although I did, in fact, purposefully exclude one area of recurring interest and common concern, that of government funding cuts. The issue of funding cuts is not included in this study, because it is not actually a direct critique of the university itself. In an effort to focus on problems that concern the internal workings of the university, it is indeed necessary to exclude this issue, for, while funding cuts certainly have an important impact on the ability of the university to function properly, and at its best, it is not within the direct power of the university community to inaugurate change regarding them. Therefore, criticism regarding funding cannot fairly be considered a critique of the university community itself.

throughout the body of my dissertation: the ultimate survival of a slightly defeated but accessible sense of idealism.

In tone, Lodge's novel is often more positive concerning the state of the university, and this idealism provides the culminating point of my examination of the university as subject in these novels. The contemporary university novel has been accused of being ultimately ineffective, because, in its challenge to the current state of the university, it is often considered idiosyncratic rather than revolutionary in nature. John Lyons declares, "The academy which remains, remains unchanged--even uncriticized except in terms of personal invective" (136). This is, in part, seen to be the result of an (excessively) traditional apprehension of the university's true nature and purpose. Carter determines that "Matthew Arnold...set the discourse which controls all British university fiction" (77). But to dismiss contemporary university novels on the grounds that they are simply self-interested and/or traditional tends, in these cases, to overlook the more fundamental nature of the idealism that underwrites the novels' varying positions. That is, while it is commonly accepted that *Lucky Jim* marked a movement into increasingly bitter invective against the university, Jim Dixon's idealistic attachment to the university is commonly overlooked. A kind of subverted idealism is also to be found in each of the novels studied throughout the body of this dissertation, and Lodge's novel, the most obviously positive, serves as an appropriate standard by which to finally measure it. That is, although the focus of these novels is critical, and although they, in their criticism, can be disapproving, mocking and even derogatory in their tone, ultimately it is clear that the

novels are criticizing the university for its inability to maintain a strong sense of its function and purpose in contemporary society. Thus, Rossen notes,

The anger and indignation which often informs these novels springs in part from a love of the ideal of the University, or of pure scholarship, and they express the authors' indignant desire to make academe become more of the utopia which they believe it could be. (184)

It may be determined self-interested for authors to uphold the study of literature, for example, as a transparent good, and detractors may complain that the novelists are supporting very traditional and idealistic visions of the university; however, these are not grounds ultimately for dismissal. Quite the opposite, it is in the idealism expressed in the contemporary university novel that one can locate what critics, novelists, and members of society at large have in common for the vision of what the university can, should and might yet do.

#### The State of the University: Non-Fiction

In order to provide a backdrop for this common ground, this study of the novels is supplemented by some recent criticism on the role of the university. The growing interest in the university novel as a sub-genre has been matched in the last fifteen years by non-fiction studies on the state of the university.<sup>16</sup> Written by scholars working inside the

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<sup>16</sup> The recent nature of this phenomenon is suggested most clearly, in retrospect, in an article written by William E. Cain published in 1985. In this article, Cain refers to Richard Ohmann's book *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (1976) and observes that "strangely, no one has sought to revise Ohmann and give a more focused and persuasive critique of "English" as a discipline...Critics have failed to engage the issues that Ohmann confronts, and this is particularly striking during a period when many lament the condition of English studies and feel hard-pressed to justify their labor...Ohmann's book

university community, these books grapple with the same questions that distinguish the university novel: What is the university's purpose? What is the university?, and, even more practically, Is the university working? If one were to judge from the doom-laden titles of these non-fiction works, the answer to this latter question would be no. Titles such as *The University in Ruins*, *Crisis in the Academy*, *Petrified Campus*, and *Killing the Spirit* do little to offer solace in a time of widely acknowledged crisis.

These critical, non-fiction studies provide an important touchstone in my evaluation of the verity of the issues raised by the university novels because they raise many of the same questions, at the same time, and in the same environment. However, it must be noted that I intend to use this non-fiction written on the state of the university as a *buttress* to the arguments explored in the university novels, and *not* as a means of testing those arguments.<sup>17</sup> That is, due to limitations of space, and, more importantly, in order to privilege the novels above the conflicts with which they intersect, I make no attempt to document *all* the varying positions of all the critics writing on, for example, the current state and purpose of post-structuralist literary theory. In this project, I use the scholarly studies in order to establish a background for the positions the novelists explore in their books. This background is important as it locates a corresponding response inside

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remains the first and last of its kind, its concerns judged to be important but apparently not compelling enough to merit further study." (85-6) It has become clear that Cain clearly "spoke too soon" as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) would soon follow as a specific examination of the state of English literature. Bloom's book was, furthermore, only one of a spate of books from 1987 to the present discussing the state of the humanities specifically and the university in more general terms.

<sup>17</sup> As such, I attempt to get to the fundamental level of the concerns addressed in the non-fiction the same way that I do in the fiction. Thus, critics with widely acknowledged differences are discussed in terms of their areas of agreement. That is, their potentially differing solutions to the problem of the overriding sense of competition in the university today are not as important as their agreement that it currently is a problem. This allows their concerns to contextualize the issue as it appears in the novels, without allowing discussion of their positions to override the focus on the novels.

the university community and proves that the novels, like the non-fiction, are positing viable critical responses to important questions concerning the state of the university. Rather than an exaggerated and hostile charge from people who have rejected the academic community, the university novel is revealed as an important complement to the serious concerns expressed inside the university by academics. Indeed, the context provided by the non-fiction allows the reader to see in action what the non-fiction discusses in principle and thereby demonstrates that the university novel is actually a unique means of access to the preoccupations and anxieties of a community in crisis.

#### The Focus on the Humanities

Throughout my study, I also make little or no distinction between English, the Humanities and the university at large. This is in specific response to the novelists who also do not make these distinctions, and even to the non-fiction, which also often assumes the relevance of a discussion of the state of university English departments to the Humanities and, in turn, to the state of the university as a whole. It must be acknowledged that the reason for this assimilation stems in part from the fact that novelists, by virtue of their craft, tend to identify with the study of English above and beyond any other study in the university; it is also true that most of the novelists studied herein have worked in university English departments themselves. Most of the scholars writing on the university are also members of English or Humanities departments. This gives an admitted slant to their apprehension of the university, but it is one that is not without merit. For since the inception of the modern university, the Humanities have



been considered its heart. This is perhaps evidenced by the fact that in the current university crisis, as the traditional notions of education and the purpose of the university have begun to erode, this heart has been the first to register signs of distress. The current reduced state and status of Philosophy, Classics, History and English departments once so clearly privileged and revered, proves this beyond doubt. Alvin Kernan, quoting a friend, asserts

"If you want to know what is actually disturbing a university, visit its English department." And whatever its status as an academic subject, literary studies has been an excellent point from which to observe the conflicting view at work in the universities in the latter half of the twentieth century. (xviii)

My study allows this foundational assumption.

### Critiquing the Campus: Academic Practice as Literary Subject

The contemporary university novel is uniquely situated to observe and respond to the current state of crisis widely acknowledged and discussed throughout the university community, and in its response one hears from the very people (creative writers) who sustain the critic's academic practice. From the issue of competition, to the effect of contemporary literary theory, to the university's responsibility to the public, the university novel offers a considered and credible critique on the function, the value and the purpose of the university. The unique nature of this critique has caused it to be discredited, dismissed and devalued; it is time now for it to be even more closely studied.

## Chapter One -- Competition and Idealism

Ideally, the atmosphere of scholarship is competitive to the degree that it encourages subtlety and originality of thought, and promotes discourse. Indeed, competition may be considered a necessary component of the pursuit of knowledge, as it prevents the scholar from living and working in a vacuum. It ensures that the scholar is not working for him/herself alone but for the advancement of knowledge that concerns the community of which s/he is part, a community that ideally exists both inside and outside the university. But competition can become perverted to the extent that it begins to work against, rather than for, these ideals of scholarship. The university novel has traditionally dealt with the extremes of behaviour that can result from a competitive impulse gone wrong. In Henry James' *The Aspern Papers* (1888), the narrator, a scholar, considers robbing a dying woman and marrying her spinster niece to gain access to the papers of his renowned subject of study, Jeffrey Aspern. He is motivated in his pursuit to provide documents that he believes will be of "immense interest to the public, [and] immeasurable importance as a contribution to Jeffrey Aspern's history" (James 100), but he is obviously driven beyond the necessary parameters of these concerns. In a moment of indecision, grappling with his temptation to marry the woman who has recently inherited the papers, he is forced to recognize that "[his] predicament was the just punishment of that most fatal of human follies...not...know[ing] when to stop" (James 138).

Clearly, the competitive impulse, along with its attendant hazards, is too basic a human trait to be distinctly a concern of the university novel. But the university becomes

an ideal locus of the disparate aims of competition in its encouragement of abstract ideals in the face of the harsher truths that govern the realities of promotion, status, and power. In C.P. Snow's *The Masters* (1951), competition for the deanship results in some crass politicizing that pits one colleague against another, but there remains in Snow's book a standard of conduct and an idealism that serves as the counterbalance to any of the extremes of competitive jealousy or political intrigue exhibited by the characters. This standard and sense of an ideal is pointedly characterized at the end of the book. Snow's character, Lewis Eliot, contextualizes the proceedings depicted in the novel by declaring that

Many able men entered the academic life in those years because, with a maximum of comfort, it settled their consciences and let them feel that their lives were not utterly without use. For many it was a profound comfort to be one of a society completely sure of itself, completely certain of its values, completely without misgivings about whether it was living a good life...[no one] ever doubted that it was a good thing to be a fellow. They took it for granted, felt they were envied, felt it was right they should be envied...a good many [men] would have found in the college the least anxious and most comforting of lives, and some, more surprisingly, the freest. (Snow 374)

Snow's novel ends on this note and seems to suggest that while competition and political ambition can become a burden in any community, it is a particularly disruptive force in the university as the university community is usually characterized by a lack of anxiety and comforted by its unique sense of purpose. Thus, while Snow's novel concerns itself

with a time of supreme anxiety in the university, it is not depicted as the norm, but as a moment when the occasional bureaucratic necessities of politics and promotion intrude upon the customary work of the university that is characterized by a relative freedom from these concerns. The men in academic life are envied because their lives are dedicated, for the most part, to matters of higher concern.

What is most notable about this passage relative to contemporary discussions about the university is that Snow's assumptions about privilege and purpose are now completely absent from contemporary discussions. The power politics Snow explores in his novel have become the norm and represent one of the most frequent themes commonly explored in recent university novels. The competition that overtakes the university community and divides the fellows into rival camps has a resonance and applicability to the university today that Snow's final image of academic life specifically does not. Today, the university is a community so unsure of itself, and uncertain of its values that its members are plagued by many misgivings about the quality and purpose of a scholarly life. They do not, by and large, feel envied but rather ignored or harassed, degraded or vilified, and life in the academy can be a very anxious, even uncomfortable, life defined increasingly by its restrictions rather than its freedoms.

I cannot and do not mean to speak to the veracity of Snow's claims for the university community, however. Whether or not Snow was idealizing academic life to any degree becomes irrelevant relative to the magnitude of the contrast between his depiction and the possibility of any such claim being made for academic life today. The fact of his statement and the nature of his idealism are sufficient in themselves to demonstrate that even the most general impressions as to the nature and purpose of the

university community have importantly changed. Indeed, recent university fiction assumes the absence of any such sense of community, certainty or privilege. And recent non-fiction not only assumes its absence but suggests further that it never existed. Titles such as Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature*, Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* and Carl Woodring's *Literature: An Embattled Profession* may acknowledge a past time of relative vitality, unity and peace, but all are aware that Snow's depiction of academic life (as it rests confidently with the noun "men") achieved assurance, prestige, and envy through practices that were largely exclusionary. This precludes any nostalgia for the past. But, as Bill Readings states, "We are no longer excluded, not because racism, sexism and class difference have come to an end...[but] because...there is no longer any culture to be excluded from" (103). That is, the present has not invaded and supplanted the old university community according to the principles that would justify its obsolescence. A new and better sense of purpose and idealism has not replaced an old and regressive one; rather purpose and idealism have been lost as new ideas invalidated the old without providing alternatives. Thus, in a sense, we have precluded the possibility of idealism as we stand looking out from a vantage point that disarms the past as it simultaneously deprives the future. As a result, Snow's depiction of academic life seems remarkably out of sync. with the mood of present-day academics who affirm that we are emerging from a debased past to an increasingly threatened future. Carl Woodring, writing in response to the "hundreds of books" recently written on the state and status of the university, declares that "Teachers of literature, accustomed to neglect as harmless drudges or undecipherable sophists [have] begun to draw attention as incendiaries betraying the citadel" (81). Whether or not teachers of literature or teachers in the

humanities or the university community as a whole is targeted, the situation is commonly accepted as a bad one that is worsening. The "hundreds of books" Woodring refers to place emphasis on different potential causes and different solutions of varying degrees of promise and/or necessity. And although this recent non-fiction writing on the university has a habit of declaring itself against other such writing (they warn that the crisis is either under-estimated or exaggerated, misapprehended or misdiagnosed), they all acknowledge a crisis. It is with this prevailing sense of crisis, that exists in the absence of any enduring idealism, that I wish to engage.

The major feature of this crisis (as it is presented in these books) is that the university has lost any, most, or all of its contact with a sense of meaning or purpose. The university community is no longer even remotely "completely sure of itself, completely certain of its values" (Snow 374). Instead, critics ask "What is the function of literary study, if any, in the new technologized, globalized, post-colonial research university?" (Miller *Black* 57). Rather than being assured of a place within the society, rather than feeling that "they [are] envied" (Snow 374), academics today grapple with a sense of dislocation between a rapidly evolving society and a labouring institution.<sup>1</sup> The prevailing sense is that "...we are watching the complex transformations of a social institution in a time of radical political, technological, and social change" (Kernan *Death*

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Graff in his 1987 book *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* presents an interesting background to any current discussion of the state of the university. He explains that the common assumption Snow encourages here, that "the founders of academic literary studies must originally have had a shared idea of their rationale that...somehow got lost along the way," is false. Instead, "there were from the outset fundamental disagreements" (3). Although the probability of this is most often conceded by those writing on the state of the contemporary university, their concern with the present, and particularly the unique challenges of today's society (represented, for example, by dropping literacy rates and the growing influence of technology), often seems to prevent them from feeling comforted by this long history of conflict.

10), and that the university is in crisis because the institution has not been able to negotiate this rapid rate of change in our society. As Bill Readings states, "the grand narrative of the University, centred on the production of a liberal, reasoning subject, is no longer readily available to us" (9). The university community cannot derive its sense of purpose from ideology that has been outmoded or a level of certainty and assurance that is now considered highly suspect. In the university, theory has played a large part "in the dismantling of the old idea that [professors] should teach the values of a unified culture" (Miller *Black* 59). This has left academics without a clear awareness of what it is that they should teach instead or, indeed, why they should teach it at all:

Absolute knowledge, 'essentialism,' and traditional concepts of what we can know and who can know it [have been] questioned at all levels.

Science set the scene with relativity theory, fractals, and the uncertainty principle, but in the latter half of the century deconstruction...took uncertainty to its nihilistic extremes in the humanities and social sciences, "demystifying" traditional knowledge, replacing positives with relativism, substituting interpretation for facts, and discrediting objectivity in the name of subjectivity. (Kernan *Plato's* xvi)

Whether postmodern theories have been a necessary response to societal change or a precipitating force in the dislocation between the university and its traditional function is a contentious issue. But critics tend to agree that the presence of postmodern theory has resulted in a loss of contact with the objectives of the university, and without them academics are left grappling with ways to characterize the institution and its departments:



Postmodernism rejects the naturalness or inherent rationality of hierarchical relationships such as mature vs. immature, high vs. popular culture, authority vs. power, truth vs. opinion. Thus, the markers that guide sound judgment vanish, leaving confusion as to the purpose or meaning of education. (Emberley 106)

Members of the university community can no longer function as the arbiters of value or truth because the ideas of value and truth have been too radically undermined.

Consequently, it is commonly argued, university professors can no longer be envied, nor "[feel] it [is] right they should be envied" (Snow 374), because postmodern theories have revealed that they do not have the authority to "guide sound judgment" (Emberley 106) and that their past authority rested not on principles of truth or justice but derived from an enforced exclusion and a guarded influence.

It is worth noting, certainly, that it is a mark of the university's success that its members have rejected the exclusionary principles taken for granted in Snow's time and the university community has expanded in ways that are undoubtedly positive. But the loss of hierarchical relationships has nonetheless been particularly devastating to the function of the university as a whole, and in particular to the humanities, as they have traditionally relied on the very distinctions of judgment that have now been debased.

Postmodern theory has struck so deeply in the university community that it has questioned the applicability of traditional study itself, destabilizing what has in the past been considered the most basic principles of the subjects of study. In the study of English literature, for example,

Genres like tragedy and comedy, once a bastion of literary reality, have become as soft as the word *literature* [itself]. Style, form, and structure, too, have lost their substance under the cold eye of the deconstructing critic. Metaphor, image, symbol, irony, ambiguity, and all the many figures of speech that were once thought to distinguish literature from other modes of discourse are by now only tropes or rhetorical devices... used to create illusions of truth or reality. (Kernan *Death* 72)

As I have said, it is an issue in contention whether "the cold eye of the deconstructing critic" is the culprit here or not, but it is commonly argued that deconstructive theories, whether they precipitate or reflect changes in society, have resulted in the loss of the university's traditional sense of meaning or purpose, and this has had ramifications in each sector of the university, department by department, down to the most basic level of each subject's function and purpose.

Without notions of value and judgment, the function of the university is left in question, and without even an official guiding principle or purpose, doctrines of inclusion can result in confusion, such that diversity, for example, becomes everything from the rallying cry to the scourge of the university. Critics argue in reaction to the divisive nature of these issues, asserting that "The crying need is not to eliminate diversity but to discover and promulgate what scholars and critics of language and literature have yet in common, preferably something other than the instinct of self-preservation" (Woodring 95). With little in common, it is feared that the university community is in danger of losing any coherent sense of itself, and the society may lose confidence in the university's ability to function meaningfully. This threat is palpable in cases, like those in recent

years, in which the university loses dominion even over its most basic function, for example, when it is considered, "as a provocative editorial read in...*Economist*: 'Today, knowledge is [considered] too important to be left to academics'" (Emberley 11).

This has dramatic results. For it is arguable that once academics lose their sense of themselves as a functioning community with an identifiable (even if qualified) purpose, they become not colleagues in the academic environment, but rivals. This can result in an perversion of the competitive impulse as the mood of scholarship is altered away from a clear connection to ideals of practice toward a determined instinct for survival. Thus, the idealism that forwards competition as a necessary component of scholarship (as it promotes discussion and forwards the pursuit of knowledge) becomes overwhelmed by competition as the only available means of success in the *absence* of notions of truth, value, authority and knowledge. Thus, competition is relegated to its baser purpose as a means to power, and academics begin to describe the university environment as one

in which critical discourse is perceived as spectacle rather than exchange, in which information is delivered, rather than discussed. There is little of a sense of generosity among participants. Our discourse is increasingly feudal, private, and territorial. (Lecker 70)

Because the university has lost its connection to the abstract ideals of the function of the university and its purpose in its pursuit of knowledge, competition has continued to exist only to serve the realities of bureaucratically ordained status and prestige. Thus, academics are continuously being alerted to a present reality in which "...the scholarly culture [has been]...taken over by a powerful political and economic discourse that

entrenches aggressive entrepreneurial activity" (Emberley 95). In our present reality, as depicted by recent non-fiction on the university, the pursuit of knowledge has been overwhelmed by a sense of competition that can no longer be proscribed by the scholarly ideals that have been relegated to the status of illusions. In contrast to Snow's depiction of academic life, the general impressions courted both inside and outside the university express an utter lack of comfort, an abundance of anxiety and an overriding sense of futility. Bill Readings writes, as it is largely accepted, that "few communities are more petty and vicious than university faculties" although they are "supposed to be the potential model for free and rational discussion" (180). Rather than fight the battle that they are losing and addressing the university's function in society, it is argued that academics have become further and further removed from society as they continue to compete for competition's sake in an arena that has, as a result, become increasingly restricted and self-indulgent. Alvin Kernan asserts that

We are narrowing, not enlarging our horizons. We are shucking, not assuming our responsibilities. And we communicate with fewer and fewer because it is easier to jabber in a jargon than to explain a complicated matter in the real language of men. How long can a democratic nation afford to support a narcissistic minority so transfixed by its own image?

(Kernan *Death* 6)

The question assumes the answer, which is "not long," or perhaps even, "no longer." But what Kernan does not mention here is that it is not simply "easier to jabber in a jargon," but that, throughout the ascendancy of postmodern theories, it has been more lucrative to do so. And if competition has remained a motive force in the absence of all motive

forces, the entire university community has been driven to pursue their rewards where they may be found.

It is argued that scholarship has begun to operate, to compete, in a vacuum, estranged from its function within the society, divorced from any sense of a unifying purpose, yet continuing. As Carl Woodring states

From theorists we have come to perceive much more about authorship, from theory we have begun to practice new distinctions, but we have found only each other as willing depositories for what we have learned. Focus on theory has intensified an unearned vanity. Good work has been done, but it is as if we accomplished the basic research for which no application was ever to be sought, nothing that served any purpose beyond the sharpening of minds--like the sharpening of knives for display under glass in a museum. A profession shrinking and in retreat is not helped by leaders who enjoy the illusion of winning. (69)

The "illusion of winning" is what is left academics in the absence of idealism, function or purpose, and "winning" is an idea that is inconsistent with competition in its ideal form in a community of scholars seeking motivation in what must be the presumably endless pursuit of knowledge. (By its very nature, winning is a *finite* pursuit, while knowledge is *infinite*. The preoccupation with winning is thus a predisposition against the pursuit of real knowledge.) "Winning" is in answer to a competitive impulse that has been driven beyond the parameters of scholarship proper into arenas of self-promotion, power mongering and political intrigue.

In a manner similar to the critics' depictions of the present state of scholarship, Carol Shields' *Swann* and A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* both depict sympathetic scholars who have a genuine love for literature caught in an academic world of cutthroat acquisitiveness and widespread suspicion and distrust. Both novels reflect the concerns consistently expressed in the non-fiction written on the university as they depict the university environment as one that quashes, rather than encourages, scholarly idealism. The resultant loss of idealism causes the ascendancy of a competitive impulse (as it, at least, results in practical rewards), which then becomes the driving force behind current scholarship to its own detriment.

In *Swann*, Sarah Maloney is a successful feminist scholar working at a Chicago university who is credited with the discovery of Mary Swann. Swann is a Canadian poet whose burgeoning reputation rests on a slim volume of poems that was published after her sudden and violent death at the age of fifty. Sarah's first person narration makes up the first section of the book. She is witty and personable and the section deals mainly with her experience with and work on Mary Swann's poetry and the impact this work has on her life. She introduces herself in the text through her clothing, announcing that "...two years ago...I dressed in ratty jeans and a sweatshirt with lettering across the chest" (Shields 5). She uses this superficial description to explain "where [she] was," and she uses it to make it explicit that she has since undergone a transformation. The transformation is one from ratty jeans to "expensive suits and...silk blouses" (Shields 5), one that obviously tracks her movement from student (the sweatshirt with lettering across the chest suggests a school sweatshirt) to successful "feminist writer and teacher," a position of status. Sarah's emphasis on her clothing links her academic successes to

material wealth and to symbols of prestige that she finds "richly satisfying." Importantly, her emphasis on the material is followed by her confession that as a feminist, she is "having second thoughts about the direction of feminist writing in America" (Shields 5). This encourages the reader to recognize that in the face of doubt (a doubt that, as the reader sees throughout the narrative, causes her to question what has been her major professional achievement, her feminist treatise *The Female Prism*), Sarah's sense of her success can be found more dependably in the wealth of her material possessions. She admits, "I'm a person who can, in the midst of depression, be roused by the rub of a cashmere scarf in my fingers" (Shields 5) just as she notes, "For twenty-five years [feminists have] been crying: *My life is my own*. A moving cry, a resounding cry, but what does it *mean*?" (Shields 5). Thus, the physical beauty and immutable presence of the cashmere scarf is reassuring in the face of the abstract (her depression). In contrast, her feminist certainty ("my life is my own"), has, rather than providing continued assurance, exposed her to postmodern doubt. This doubt is specifically centred in her perceptions concerning feminism, and academia in general. She admits feeling a lack of direction in the absence of old certainties: "God is dead, peace is dead, the sixties are dead, John Lennon and Simone de Beauvoir are dead, the woman's movement is dozing--checking its inventory let's say--so what's left?" (Shields 18). Sarah is exhibiting here the same lack of purpose described in the non-fiction on the state of the university. She has become estranged from her sense of place in her environment when, as a feminist, she is no longer certain of the meaning or the possibilities of feminism. Her answer to the above question, "what's left?" is, as a result, "the quotidian" (Shields 19). In the face of



spiritual, psychological and idealistic doubt, Sarah is comforted by her daily cheese pita, her "beautiful briefcase" (Shields 20) and her mail.

The superficiality of Sarah's initial self-characterization and her modes of support persuade the reader to link her motivations for continued success as a feminist writer and teacher to her material comforts. The theoretical and ethical nature of truths in Sarah's feminist writing has afforded her a nice wardrobe and the perquisites of a successful life. As she falters in those assurances, however, she is left "checking her inventory" (Shields 18) with the rest of the woman's movement, struggling to realize the life she has claimed for her own. Because one way to realize her life is materially, she takes comfort in her clothing, her home, and her status. This then, in the absence of anything else, becomes adequate motivation to find still greater success as a feminist critic, and is, in part, her motivation in her work with Mary Swann. Mary Swann is a woman "who become[s] for [Sarah] a model of endurance and survival" (Shields 55); thus, she represents a way back into the realm of feminist certainty. Mary Swann is a woman poet who lived a hard, narrow life, was murdered by her husband and whose poetry, idiosyncratic and untutored in its genius, has remained undiscovered. Sarah's recovery of her allows her to retrieve the feminist certainty that declares Mary Swann's life should "be her own" and allows Sarah to restore it to her. She states "Poor Mary Swann. That's how I think of her, *poor* Mary Swann, with her mystical ear for the tune of words, cheated of life, cheated of recognition..." (Shields 14). Sarah's work with Swann redresses these wrongs that are verifiable and particular and have clear solutions, solutions that coincide with Sarah's need for self-actualization as Mary Swann's reputation will further her own. Swann

allows Sarah to tread the same road again. Not to express the solvency of her feminist ideals but to perpetuate them in the face of growing uncertainty.

It is important that Sarah discovers Mary Swann in a scene entirely removed from the academic milieu, however, for it reaffirms for the reader that, despite her academic insecurity, Sarah's appreciation for Swann's poetry is sincerely established. Nearing the completion of her degree, due to the pressures of a love affair, Sarah retreats to a friend's cottage, and it is there, where she is able to "pare down" life "to its purities" (Shields 12), that she first reads Mary Swann's poetry. She observes of herself: "I seemed to inhabit an earlier, pre-grad-school...self. My thesis, *The Female Prism*, and the chapter that had to be rewritten were forgotten, swirled away like dishwater" (Shields 13). The use of the domestic image is notable here as it brings Sarah not only back to the mundane but also back to traditional women's work, work in ironic contrast to her feminist thesis. Sarah, in this environment, is released from the questing spirit inherent in academic pursuit and begins to read, not as student, critic or academic, but reader. She reads "trashy old magazines...and a shelf full of cottage novels" and feels both "winsomely trivial" and "redemptively ordinary" (Shields 13). There is an interesting contrast created by these two descriptions of her state of mind that sets up the tension between the sense of pride and success Sarah feels as an academic ("winsomely trivial") and the self-consciousness she suffers as one ("redemptively ordinary"). The nostalgia implied by her winsomeness suggests an arrogance that "redemptive" flatly denies. This contrast is emphasized when later she discusses her first reading of Swann's poetry:

...I found myself suddenly grabbed by an elemental seizure of the first order. I was instantly alert, attenuated, running my fingers under the

words, writing furiously in the margin (and recognizing at the same time the half-melancholy truth that this was what I would always, somewhere or other be doing.) (Shields 43)

The true excitement and joy of discovery that Sarah feels is tempered by an underlying disappointment in academic pursuit that holds such excitement and joy as the pinnacle of achievement while it can only find expression "in the margin." There is a sense here that Sarah recognizes that she is secondary (marginal) as an academic to something that is primary. The poetry itself inhabits the primary realm as the poems will always be themselves, even after years on a dusty shelf, while Sarah, as an academic, suffers some sense of eclipse or uselessness, as she is relegated to "somewhere or other," relative non-importance.<sup>2</sup> Sarah's reaction to the discovery of Swann's book testifies to a genuine and immediate sense of connection to the poems; it is the reaction to her reaction that verifies her uncertainty in regard to her work as a scholar.

Sarah is compelled on the strength of that sense of connection to immediately visit Swann's hometown of Nadeau, Ontario. Once there, it is the genuine nature of her

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<sup>2</sup>While this is perhaps an exaggerated instance of her insecurity, the new sense of purpose Sarah's eventual pregnancy gives her reaffirms the suggestion that she longs not to be simply the handmaiden to creativity, but creator. It is made clear in the last section of the novel that Sarah (throughout her own section) is grappling with her sense of purpose as an academic. Newly married and pregnant, she meets a fan of hers on a bus to whom she can now happily confess she is "a little less positive now. About everything. A little more flexible" (Shields 316). Her fan, wearing and identified by her fur coat (again, a symbol of success and prestige) is shocked by the developments in Sarah's personal life as they seem to deny the claims in her book. In her book, Sarah supports "a militant position," identifies "men as the masked enemy," and asserts that although love and marriage don't necessarily "cancel each other out," "marriage is a series of compromises" (Shields 316). She confesses that despite what she had written in her book "this is what I've always wanted only I didn't know it" (Shields 317). With her pregnancy, Sarah is given a new sense of purpose that places her outside the realm of her own feminist rhetoric, yet ironically leaves her feeling more centred. Sarah is given a firmer sense of herself and her life's purpose in the traditional roles of wife and mother, than in her role as a feminist critic which left her feeling "in the margin." This recognizes the lack of a verifiable sense of purpose in current academic scholarship that estranges one from the old frameworks of self-identification while failing to provide viable alternatives.

respect for Swann's poetry in conjunction with her insecurity concerning her position as an academic that causes her to behave with what she recognizes as uncharacteristic reticence when she is called upon to determine for herself the extent of her rights as an academic. She interviews Rose Hindmarch, who presents herself as Mary Swann's only friend, and observes "As she talked I took notes, feeling like a thief but not missing a word" (Shields 45). The imperative that requires her to be thorough in her quest for information chafes against her sense of propriety and, when she arrives on Mary Swann's deserted farm, she feels "the queasy guilt of the trespasser" (Shields 48). She is momentarily overwhelmed by these feelings of shame and her sense of what is right and appropriate quell her desire to know more. She concludes that her academic purposes are not sufficient in themselves to allow her the right to intrude upon the scene of Swann's life struggle and eventual murder: "...what right did I have to dig up buried shame, furtive struggle? Besides, I'd seen enough" (Shields 48). However, the competition she eventually becomes engaged in, as a Mary Swann scholar, requires more ruthless behaviour. In the scholarly community, her hesitancy allows her competitors to take advantage of what she potentially leaves behind. And she is forced to admit that "later, hearing about the poems Willard Lang discovered under the linoleum, I had regrets" (Shields 48). In the face of her floundering sense of purpose, competition asserts itself as a motive force sufficient to guide her past momentary feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt.

This competition is initiated with the approach of the first symposium on the work of Mary Swann. And it intensifies as the various "experts" in this relatively uncharted and

therefore potentially promising field, including Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy<sup>3</sup> and Willard Lang, among some others, begin jockeying for a position of authority. Sarah's sense of her work and herself as an academic is challenged in this contest, as she must negotiate a competitive impulse that offends rather than complements her ideals of scholarly pursuit. And because she is losing touch with the ideological basis for her work, she is vulnerable to practical concerns that allow her sense of purpose to be often overwhelmed by competitive fervour. This fervour can be located in Sarah's outright dismissal of her "fellow Swannian[s]" (Shields 240). She refers to her fellow experts on Swann with her most unequivocal statements of disapproval: the "the poor sap" (32), "the swine" (14), the "shit...an asshole" (333). And the sense of purpose and meaning she takes from her work on Swann begins to spring directly from her scorn of the other academics interested in her poetry. She asserts "My own responsibility toward Mary Swann...is custodial" and she refers to herself as Swann's "watchwoman, her literary executor, her

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<sup>3</sup> Morton Jimroy is a more unsympathetic character and, perhaps, would have been the more obvious choice as a reflection of competitive extremism in the novel. However, much of Jimroy's behaviour as a scholar, since it is introduced second to Sarah's, actually provides a parallel, and in some cases, an extension to Sarah's behaviour. The disparate effect in sympathy then is more often a case of personality rather than a reflection of individual scruples. Morton is much less witty or personable than Sarah. Instead, he is introverted, defensive and spiteful. But he voices similar misgivings about scholarship. He elevates his own work on Swann by imagining that he will "take revenge for her" (Shields 103), and that he must protect her from "the theoreticians" who will "[tear] her limb from limb" (Shields 95), and he needs Swann to revitalize his own relationship with poetry and perpetuate the success of his career. He also confesses that he is "disappointed in [Swann]" when his every available source on her fails to yield anything of use for his biography. This disappointment and the resulting fear of "defeat" (Shields 133) motivate him to manipulate Swann's image by destroying letters and asserting the "Dickinsonian influence" (Shields 135) he feels he needs, but has been specifically and reliably told could not be there. He is also as subjective in his interpretation of Swann's influences as Sarah is in the interpretation of her poetry; even in his desperate quest for material, he dismisses her past: asserting "Parentage unremarkable" because "genius owe[s] no debts to parents; one has only to look at his own sad set" (Shields 133). But he does sink below Sarah's standard of behaviour at points. Most notably, he steals. He steals Mary Swann's picture from Rose's museum display, of which she is obviously and inordinately proud, and, from Swann's grown daughter, the pen with which she wrote her poems. But, where Morton departs from Sarah, he is exceptional (going to lengths one would not likely conceive as systemic). Thus, Sarah becomes a more credible representative of the pitfalls of competitive scholarship.

defender and loving caretaker" (Shields 32). Sarah feels she must, as a feminist, not only save Swann's poetry from obscurity, but that she must save Mary Swann from other academics who will "promote her...do their social and psychoanalytical sugarjobs on her...violat[e] her for [their] own gain...catch her out, bend her into God's messenger or the handmaiden of Emily Dickinson..." (Shields 32). She dismisses her fellow academics on grounds that she believes elevate her own purpose, and she encourages herself to believe in her moral rights in order to sustain this sense of purpose both in her work and in the academic environment that has her competing to lay claim to an authority on Mary Swann's work. Ironically, this demonstrates that she has given in to the dangers of competition rather than rising above them. By pitting herself against, instead of allying herself with, the other experts in her field, Sarah is competing to win, and she depends on her self-created moral imperative to justify some of her more dubious conduct.

The fact that Sarah is competing, and not upholding ideals of scholarship unrecognized by her colleagues, is made clear as she exhibits many of the same tendencies she objects to in her competitors. She is self-congratulatory in her presumption that she alone understands Swann's poetry. Her question "...does anyone else--besides me that is--detect the little smiles breaking around her most dolorous lines?" (Shields 32) is clearly rhetorical, and is constructed so that the arrogance of the aside abruptly interrupts any measure of genuine desire for fellowship that may be gleaned from the question. Shields encourages the reader's apprehension of this arrogance when the much more deeply flawed character of Morton Jimroy notes as an expression of his uncertainty that Swann "oddly... seemed always to be keeping back little smiles..." (Shields 104). Contrasting Jimroy's insecurity with Sarah's self-assurance exposes

Sarah's presumption, and shows her self-congratulatory stance to be mistaken in both its form and content. Sarah is often dismissive in this manner; she calls her boyfriend, Brownie, "a lightweight" (Shields 11) in reaction to his alternate interpretation of one of Swann's poems. And she has a tendency toward elitism, marveling, for example, that as a poet, "Mary Swann's only friend should be a librarian with a little escutcheon face and a nervous laugh" (Shields 45). Indeed, Sarah herself is tempted by the very same negative extremes that she tends to ascribe flippantly to the evils of scholarship and for which she berates her colleagues. She bitterly accuses Willard Lang of being "equivocal in the best scholarly tradition" (Shields 30) and then grapples with how to present Mary Swann's disappointingly ordinary notebook at the symposium, in order to best represent, and thus clearly misrepresent, her genius:

I haven't yet decided how I'll present the journal at the symposium, whether to cite it as a simple country diary ("Swann had one foot firmly in the workaday world and the other...") or to offer it up as a cryptogram penned by a woman who was terrified by the realization that she was an artist. Nothing in her life had prepared her for the clarity of vision visited on her in mid life... (Shields 56)

Her equivocations here ally her work to the mere promotion and "social and psychoanalytical sugarjobs" (Shields 32) from which she earlier attempted to distance herself as Swann's "loving caretaker." The creation of Swann's reputation becomes too tied up with the promotion of Sarah's own, and in her work she increasingly attempts to discover what she wants and needs to find (as an academic and most notably as a feminist) rather than exploring the nature of what she actually observes. Her lament that

Morton Jimroy and the other scholars will be "disappointed by the notebook itself, disappointed by Mary Swann, and also, I have no doubt, disappointed by me" (Shields 56) declares the extent to which *she* is dependent upon Mary Swann to advance her own reputation, rather than simply the other way around. This might be dismissed as a necessary consequence of any intensive work in any field of study. A scholar, like Sarah, will necessarily, in her commitment to her work, feel implicated by the success or failure of her scholarship. However, Shields makes it clear that Sarah's anxiety here is more than simply a consequence of her commitment. Sarah *herself* is disappointed by the notebook. She is even offended by its utter lack of artistic quality, and laments the insipid nature of its entries, confessing:

This from the woman whose whole aesthetic was a piece of grief! The woman who had become for me a model of endurance and survival. I felt let down, even betrayed, but reluctant to admit it. (Shields 55)

Sarah, in her attempt to reconnect herself to the past feminist certainty with which she made her reputation, requires Swann to be something more than simply a great artist and thus her success or failure working on Mary Swann is dependent on more than the poetry. The notebook, which she presumptuously, and in a clear attempt to claim an authority on Swann, presents to the scene of Swann scholarship as a "journal," must therefore provide her with evidence which will support her position on Mary Swann as an example of female survival. She reports excitedly that "Swann is going to be big, big, big" because "She's the right person at the right time for one thing: a woman, a survivor, self-created (Shields 32). And this is "right" not simply for the degree to which it conforms to current



"hot" topics but for the degree to which it conforms to Sarah's previous scholarship and her sense of herself as a "feminist writer and teacher" (Shields 5).

Sarah's book *The Female Prism* explores the premise "that between mothers and daughters there is a kind of blood-hyphen that is, finally, indissoluble" (Shields 53), and Swann's poems are clearly valued by Sarah for the degree to which they may be made consistent with this vision. She is most defensive, authoritative and presumptuous in her desire to guard her own definitions of Swann's poetry as the definitive ones. She dismisses out of hand Brownie's suggestion that there are sexual implications to Swann's poems about cutting a tree at the root, calling it "preposterous," asserting "She's talking about societal and family connections and you're thinking about crude anatomy" (Shields 8). She is quick to argue that there is a depth to the poems, and as a scholar, she values, even requires, this depth. Indeed, her disappointment over the notebook is specifically connected to the lack of Swann's usual "dislocation of phrase...[and] skewed reference that is really a shrewd misguiding of those who read it" (Shield 55). She values the poetry for its "inverted image[s]... [and] underwatery text" (Shield 56), but she, in her attempt to gain authority over it, denies the subjectivity of her own readings. She is assertive to a fault, in some manner staking a claim over the poems as she reads them:

Her apple tree poem, for instance...is actually a limpid expression of female sensuality, and her water poems...trace, though some scholars disagree, the clear contours of birth and regeneration. She is the mistress of the inverted image. Take "Lilacs,"...it pretends to be an idle, passive description of a tree in blossom, but is really a piercing statement of a woman severed from her roots... (Shields 56)

Her use of words such as "actually" and "really" stress the assumed verity of her claims here, and belie the uncertainty suggested by poems that by her own assertion invert, trace and pretend. And, although her statement "some scholars disagree" may read as a concession, her following use of the word "clear" suggests that, in fact, she is placing herself in contrast to their confusion. In competition as an authority on the text, Sarah would not be inclined to concede to any other interpretations. But it is important to note here how uniformly the nature of her interpretations ally Swann's poetry with her own work as a feminist writer. This point is underscored when Sarah asserts:

...one thing I'm sure of: Mary's poems are filled with concealed references to her mother and to the strength and violence of family bonds. One poem in particular turns on the inescapable perseverance of blood ties, particularly those between mothers and daughters. (Shields 57)

She quotes a stanza of the poem to support her claim and it is the same poem that becomes the subject of a particularly comical disagreement between Morton Jimroy and Rose Hindmarch as each believes the poem to be about something still different (respectively, holy communion, and menstruation). Indeed, it is an indication of the strength of the poems that each reader finds something of their own reflected in them, and a pretty clear indication on Shields' part of her own beliefs regarding the elusive nature of art. Sarah's use of the personal "Mary" in the above passage may further indicate to the reader her personal stake in this interpretation, but her competitive scholarly authority operates in direct opposition to the idea (clearly supported by the novel itself) that *each* of

these interpretations is valid.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, it is important that Sarah mentions this particular poem (that in Shields' text is interpreted differently by three of the four major characters) as the one most closely tied to the beliefs that she previously explored in her book *The Female Prism* and that she casts it as the "one thing [she's] sure of" (Shields 57) about Swann's writing. For it suggests the extent to which contest has overwhelmed her genuine love for the literature when presentation becomes more important to her than representation.

Though Shields creates Sarah Maloney as a largely sympathetic but flawed character,<sup>5</sup> her competitive zeal does eventually lead her into some rather morally dubious

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<sup>4</sup> Each of the interpretations is valid, but it is of particular interest that the interpretations made by Rose, the non-academic, tend to carry the most weight. Rose depends upon the practical concerns of Mary Swann's life to inform her reading of the poems. And her interpretation of "Blood pronounces my name/Blisters the day with shame" as a poem about menstruation stands out against Jimroy's claim that "to me it's a pretty direct reference to the sacrament of holy communion...to a more elemental sort of blood covenant, the eating of the Godhead, that sort of thing" (Shields 184-5). Certainly, Jimroy's reading seems, despite his claim, a less "direct" reference than Rose's (even though Rose's interpretation is also personally influenced). Later, Rose interprets another poem that "is a puzzle to scholars," identifying the poem's reference to the cheap patterned linoleum in Mary Swann's farmhouse.

Feet on the winter floor  
Beat Flowers to blackness  
Making a corridor  
Named helplessness (Shields 202)

Rose's practical biases seem to have more resonance in the text than the scholars' academic ones as she seems intent on understanding the poems at a more elemental level. (Her interpretations certainly seem to deflate the assumed authority of scholarship and much of the humour in the scene between her and Jimroy arises from her simultaneous feelings of awe for his intellect and discomfort over his ignorance of the biological function of women's bodies.) Rose's practicality encourages her to attempt to communicate with the author of the poems in ways that Jimroy and Sarah do not. Thus, while Jimroy continues to look for the influence of Austen and Dickinson in the poetry of a woman who had read neither, and Sarah continues to look for an inescapable maternal influence despite no evidence or information regarding Swann's relationship with her mother, Rose is reminding Jimroy that "there's no well out there on the Swann property" (Shields 183) in what seems a more earnest attempt to appreciate Swann's water poems.

<sup>5</sup>As Clara Thomas notes in an article on *Swann*, Shields is not creating "caricatures to be laughed at, but...real people to be marveled at--and remembered" (112). Thus, Sarah is "a fully believable complex individual" (Thomas 114) with attributes and faults that arise from a complicated web of human emotions: insecurity, ambition, a sense of loss, the need for love, acceptance. However, most of Sarah's redeeming characteristics are of a personal nature while many of her faults are made manifest through her scholarship. Therefore, while "the love and care she feels for her mother, her friends, and her baby make her warmly

acts. Sarah is, like the other characters in the novel, lured away from a fair representation of Swann's genius, into a subverted creative fervour that has her inflicting her desires, needs and beliefs on Swann and effectively re-inventing her.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it becomes clear to the reader that Sarah is set to *market* Swann as "a woman, a survivor, self-created" (Shields 32) and that she will do what she must to guard what she still may hesitate to identify as her "creation" of Swann's reputation. Her feelings of not only disappointment but also "betrayal" (Shields 55) in the notebook are telling here, for the notebook confuses rather than supports her portrayal of Swann's extraordinary genius and the tale of her incredible feminist survival. The notebook ultimately makes Sarah confess what "[she] hate[s] like hell to admit", that "[Swann] [is] so...Ordinary" (Shields 352). There are, probably, some psychological or emotional implications of Sarah's desire to be handmaiden to true genius here, but what is also clearly the case is that Sarah does not profit from Swann's ordinariness. She wants to generate a feminist icon from the spectre of Mary Swann, and her active attempts to destroy or hide evidence which compromises this image demonstrates the extent to which it serves her own scholarship. Swann's rhyming dictionary with its "distracting [and]...overly bright colour" has Sarah instinctively trying to stave off her distaste as she regards it; she tries to justify Swann's use of a rhyming dictionary by remembering that another feminist icon, Sylvia Plath, used a thesaurus, but the dictionary begins to "seem ominous and to lend a certain unreality to the notebook beside it" (Shields 50), the notebook, that at this point still holds the promise

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human" (Thomas 115), her arrogance, elitism, and defensiveness as a scholar constitute the substance of her faults.

<sup>6</sup> Clara Thomas similarly identifies Sarah as one of "a whole group of people...out to make or enhance their reputations by exploiting Mary Swann" (113).

that will eventually be betrayed. The notebook is made to seem unreal because the rhyming dictionary compromises the image of Swann's unrehearsed, untutored genius. Sarah's reaction is to throw it away, thus demonstrating the extent to which she is prepared to willfully *misrepresent* Swann in order to enhance Swann's status in the literary world and, in so doing, enhance her own reputation as the watchwoman and caretaker to this recovered feminist icon and true genius.

Even further, the extremes of behaviour that Sarah's competitive fervour tempts her into are specifically depicted as "literary" (Shields 30) in their disproportion. Sarah must moderate her tendencies toward academic authoritarianism several times throughout the novel. She asserts almost wildly "[these] poems are my toys, if you like, little wooden beads I can manipulate on a cord" in an attempt to inspire herself in her scholarship, only to immediately qualify: "Unworthy that. Settle down." (Shields 61). This manner of assertion followed by qualification becomes a reflection of the push/pull that begins to operate between the ends of her scholarly ambition and what can still be identified as her genuine love for the poetry, and she tends to qualify her most assertive statements, betraying an uncertainty of purpose that ultimately makes her, at least, sympathetic in her folly. She states "In a sense I invented Mary Swann and am responsible for her," then immediately qualifies, "No, too literary that. Better just say I discovered Mary Swann" (Shields 30). In her excitement, Sarah is tempted into overstatement she considers "literary" in its self-importance. Her competitive impulse is not ultimately so pervasive as to uphold this, however, so she qualifies her role to become Swann's "discoverer." This is a qualification she is willing to stand by until the spectre of her opponent, "swine incarnate" (Shields 32) Willard Lang, inspires her to qualify further, admitting that "In

truth, no one really discovers anyone; it's the stickiest kind of arrogance to even think in such terms" (Shields 31). The lure of this arrogance is not as easily avoided as Sarah's qualification here might initially suggest, however. Sarah obviously wants to avoid the arrogance she depicts as "literary" and that she clearly perceives in Lang, but she is nonetheless caught by it. Her final qualification, while it recognizes the "sticky" pitfalls of her claim, does not really escape them. It is clear that Sarah's scholarly reputation demands that she stake a claim over Swann's work. But, when Willard Lang, as an "academic courtesy and no more" (Shields 30), allows that she is the person who discovered Swann, what she then rejects is not the arrogance of that claim, as she pretends, but her diminished status in the "slightly less distinguished role as discoverer" that Lang sets up on the "frontier between authority and discovery" (Shields 31). Thus, her final qualification does not actually cause her to reassess, more respectfully, her relationship to Swann, but is the motive that has her ultimately casting herself as Swann's "watchwoman, her literary executor, her defender and loving caretaker" (Shields 32). Thus, competition is so entrenched in the current academic climate that it proves unavoidable as it prefaces both Sarah's exaggerated claims and her modest denials.

Sarah's inflated ideas of her own work in conjunction with her irate rejection of the academics around her result in a negativity about the academic community in general that is most often defensive in its posturing, even coy. The most clearly stated criticisms of academic practice are voiced by Sarah in this mood and are delivered almost by rote. In an interview in support of her book *The Female Prism*, Sarah starts to talk about "the surrealism of scholarship" in order "to quell" a "menacing" interviewer. She lists "The pretensions. The false systems. The arcane lingo. The macho domination. The garrison

mentality. The inbred arrogance" almost insensibly and immediately is put off by her interviewer who recognizes instead her "naked need" (Shields 18). Sarah's attempt here is obviously one meant to disarm an anticipated assault by confession. By showing herself able to judge the "surrealism of scholarship," Sarah perhaps hopes to show that she is wary and, in some manner, thus adequately forewarned, if abashedly culpable. Her neediness is one that motivates her to ask to be excused for her participation in a scholarly culture that negotiates badly its pitfalls. It is important to note however that this list is not, in effect, simply a defensive gesture. For while these catchwords may seem too trite to be immediately applicable to Sarah, she does demonstrate the pretense, obscurity, authoritarianism, insularity and arrogance that underlie them. Similarly, when Rose is offended by Buswell's criticism of the holdings of her library, and obviously unprepared for his dismissive arrogance and aggressive tone, Sarah placates her, saying "...listen to me. You trust me, don't you? Buswell's a shit. Everyone in that room knows what he is. An asshole. Insecure. That's what the tenure system does to the insecure" (Shields 333). Here the tenure system is invoked to pacify the outsider as to the professed evils of the system. Although, this time Sarah places herself clearly outside the realm of Buswell's behaviour as the trustworthy guide, her own often confessed insecurity may provide an interesting sub-text for this statement. In any case, Sarah is asking for understanding, this time for Buswell, who again must be judged only in the proper context of his unnaturally competitive environment. He is driven to extremes by his insecurity but his insecurity is encouraged, and thus, perhaps even justified, in a system that is fundamentally demoralizing. Thus, the problems and shortcomings common in academic practice may express a certain awareness on Sarah's part, but she ultimately uses them as excuses for

bad behaviour. When Sarah says to Jimroy "I feel rotten about this...But then you know about the selfishness of scholars. What a lousy bunch we are" (Shields 118), she is justifying lamely her own refusal to share Swann's notebook with him even as she recognizes his need and the like nature of his claim. Sarah will assert that her scholarship opposes itself to the work of her fellow scholars, but she simultaneously hides behind the least of what she may be expected to uphold as a scholar.

These catchwords and complaints about the system of the university are important to Shields' depiction of the scholarly environment and they are, in spirit, picked up in the final section of the novel when the conduct of the scholars at the symposium further clarifies and generalizes Shields' criticism of the state of current academics. The assumed conceit of a film during the length of the symposium allows the conduct of the scholars to proceed with a minimum of direct narrative comment. The effect of this is important as it allows Shields to avoid undue narrative exaggeration in order to present a point that is all too easily represented. Shields lets the academics' own catchwords and jargon report on themselves. The accumulated presence of ideas and terms such as "microcosm", "our muse", "Oedipal darkness as symbol", "the bolted confines of regionalism", "self-evolved", "social matrix", "transcribed manifesto", "marginalia", "uncommitted to structure", "archived", "the non-specific nature of the geo-sociological references", "mythic and biblical implications", "post-modernist interpretation", and "blatantly sexist" (Shields 320-367) do not misrepresent the activity at a symposium. But they do, mixed with the mundanities of gossip and idle comment, point toward the overblown nature of some scholarship. Thus, when the lights go out, the scholars are left "looking surprisingly frail [with] a look of having been caught doing something foolish" (Shields 322). Also,



and perhaps more to the point, the inflated scene of scholarship, represented finally in its full force at the end of the novel, creates a rather stark contrast to the more direct and unflinching nature of the poems themselves. Two of the poems, functionally serving as prologue and epilogue, enclose the action of the novel and, in contrast to the scholarship, steer immediately past pretence and imprecision to the deeper themes of solitude and loss that haunt all of the main characters. The poems do not seem to suggest the conclusions of the scholars, therefore, so much as their conclusions merely suggest the presence of the poems.<sup>7</sup> And what the characters of Sarah Maloney and Morton Jimroy have portrayed in the text thus far as they have struggled to bring Mary Swann's life and her poems into the service of their scholarship, seems to be reflected by the snippets of comments and papers heard at the symposium. Swann's publisher, Frederic Cruzzi, who for his own reasons likes to place himself in opposition to the "scholarly meddling [and] whimsical interpretation" (Shields 234) of literary criticism, articulates a view supported, at some basic level at least, by the scene of the symposium. He states "I find a room full of 'scholars' tends to bring on an attack of mental indigestion. That Delphic tone they love to take. And something chilly and unhelpful about them too" (Shields 350). The "Delphic tone" is in evidence in some of the jargon listed above and the reaction to Sarah's confession concerning the notebook " (epitomized by the statement "Maybe *she* was unable to see any connections, but--" (Shields 347)) supports Cruzzi's idea that scholars are "chilly and unhelpful." Shields makes it clear that the other scholars interested in "the journal" are reacting largely to a subverted, but understandable,

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<sup>7</sup> I must rely once again on Clara Thomas who captures this quite nicely when she comments on her own work on *Swann* (the novel), saying criticism can be rather "like dissecting a butterfly with a hoe" (122).

disappointment of their own hopes regarding the notebook as a potential source of information about the mysteries surrounding Mary Swann and her poetry. But behind this elucidation lies a criticism of still deeper motives that cause them to privilege what is obscure in the first place. Swann's famous "Water Poems," "which are considered to be her best work" (Shields 14), are also her most obscure. And the interested scholars admit to hoping the journal would have elucidated the Water poems "in particular" with the classically defensive and comical amendment "Not that there's anything obscure about them" (Shields 346). It does not take much insight to understand that this tendency toward privileging obscurity is one that places the critic in the more favourable and indispensable position of explicator. This again suggests that the scholar is more often motivated by a defense of his/her own station and reputation rather than a genuine interest in the literature.

The gathering of critics at the end of the novel finally contextualizes this criticism as to the pretense of some scholarship. This gathering resists nominally the earmarks of a utopic vision, yet presents an ideal for scholarship, one that is specifically outlined in the "Director's Final Note" (Shields 396). Here, the scholars

...have been subtly transformed. They are seen joined in a ceremonial act of reconstruction, perhaps even an act of creation. There need be no suggestion that any one of them will become less selfish in the future, less cranky, less consumed with thoughts of tenure and academic glory, but each of them has, for the moment at least, transcended personal concerns. (Shields 396)

The scholars here are participating in a task, to use Shields' words in an earlier scene, that is "pared down to its purities" (Shields 13). A task that in its pure form answers to the subverted desire for creation she identifies in scholarship and allows the scholars involved to be "subtly transformed" as they are momentarily freed from the negative consequences of competition: selfishness, frustration, and self-promotion. Instead, they are being motivated here by an unadulterated love for poetry. A desire that will have them recreate (again) from scratch and memory that which initially struck them so powerfully and unforgettably: Mary Swann's poems.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, the scholars here must *participate* in this "divine task" (Smyth 138), and, rather than prove their ascendancy, one above the other (and thus pit their efforts and knowledge against each other), they must unify and share their knowledge. This reconnects them to the ideals of scholarship in which competition is tempered and subdued by the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

A.S. Byatt's novel, *Possession: A Romance* similarly depicts a scholarly environment that is compromised by an overriding sense of competition and conquest and

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note, however, that the "central surprise and revelation of *Swann*...[is that] there never was a text of Mary Swann's poems authentic to her own words" (Thomas 120). The original manuscript of the poems was damaged and the poems were "saved" by Swann's publishers, Frederic and Hildë Cruzzi, who complete what remain of the original texts by conjecture and invention. Here, in this culminating scene, the poems are again lost and must be recreated from the collective memory of the gathered scholars. This may be seen as a commentary on the function of criticism in that it realizes the tendency of the scholars thus far to recreate Swann and her poetry as their competitive zeal overwhelms their scholarly principles. But this, in the context of the scene, is at best an ironic undertone to the more positive nature of Shields' depiction of the scholars, which has them functioning in a more idealized sense as the preservers of art (and thus, the irony of the "recreation" of a poem entitled "Lost Things" is directed toward the elusive nature of art itself, "and [the fact] that its actual creation resists the analytical tools we apply to it" (Shields "Interview" 50)). This is something different than allowing that the critics in their criticism are as creative as artists, however, because this is not their criticism at work. Rather in a novel "about appearance and reality, about the whole nature of what is fictional, what is invented" (Shields "Interview" 52), this exemplifies that critics are creative because their work, when it pretends to authority and verity, is often as fictional as fiction, as it perpetually modifies (and in a competitive environment will even go so far as to distort) what it pretends to represent.

beset by "hot topics" or current fashions in thought. The novel demonstrates that these current fashions in thought, though they profess to exclude the ideas of a previous time, actually parallel them in that they provide similar limits in determining characters' senses of themselves and their world. Thus, the self-congratulatory stance of current fashions in thought that take themselves to be evolutions are exposed as merely trends. In a highly competitive environment, trends of the day cannot be ignored, as they become the very terms of recognizable success. In *Possession*, Byatt's characters must negotiate these terms of success and determine to what extent they are required to engage them in order to compete in an environment that rewards only certain types of thought and study. The scholarly environment is ultimately depicted as one that awards success to competitive marketing techniques that cater to current trends and results in an overwhelming sense of disillusionment to those estranged from them.

In *Swann*, Sarah competes, as she must, in order to succeed in the highly charged competitive environment of the university. Although she is largely a sympathetic character, she is compelled to extremes of behaviour inconsistent with her own ideals of scholarship. In *Possession*, Byatt similarly depicts characters who succeed in the university to the degree that they are willing to compete according to its terms. Leonora Stern, for example, is successful because she willingly conforms to the current trends in scholarship and because she competes aggressively to forward their cause, and her own through them. She participates in "cut-throat ideological battles of structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, deconstruction and feminism" (Byatt 311) and sacrifices the

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<sup>9</sup> As Donna E. Smyth notes "What really matters in *Swann* is the group of academics who have become, for the moment, a loving community as they piece together *Swann's Songs*" (144).

people around her, including husbands and lovers, in pursuit of these causes. She is not unsympathetic but neither does she conform, to any degree, to traditional notions concerning the elevated character and pursuit of scholars. Leonora is driven, aggressive and business-like in her approach to scholarship. She believes, rightly, that competition has become a pervasive force in the university as its members are forced to compete for money, recognition and prestige against a disenchanted public and fierce adversaries. She coaches the overwhelmed yet scrupulous Blackadder in the techniques of competition, urging him to say what he must to win. She warns him that the nature of their fight is, by necessity, rudimentary and dirty, declaring

I guess we've got *three minutes* to make out the importance of all this stuff to the great greedy public and that don't include illustrations. No, you've got to make out your Mr. Ash to be the sexiest property in town. You've got to get them by the balls, Professor. Make 'em cry. (Byatt 402)

What is important about Ash and his work becomes secondary to what is "sexy" about him, and Blackadder is forced to conform to the realities of marketing over the too subtle and elusive truths of scholarship. Thus, when Blackadder equivocates about the effect of new information on the work of his principal competitor, Mortimer Cropper, Leonora reminds him "you've got to *say* it makes [Cropper] look like a fool, if you want to keep those papers, don't you?" (Byatt 403). Thus, while the pursuit of knowledge does not necessitate that Cropper and Blackadder be competitive as scholars on the work of Randolph Henry Ash or that their competition be acrimonious, the current academic climate is such that they are pitted against one another in the race to possess papers that will grant them necessary prestige and result in much needed funding.

Cropper, the biographer, is the most ruthlessly acquisitive character in the novel and the most outwardly successful, working in a thriving department with a team of scholars under him and displaying every ostensible sign of wealth and status. In the competition to be the leading authority on Randolph Henry Ash, Cropper is the forerunner as the head of the Stant Collection, "the largest and finest collection of... Ash's correspondence anywhere in the world" (Byatt 96). Cropper's competitive impulse, however, has totally overwhelmed his personality and barely a semblance of scholarly pursuit remains in his compulsive quest to add to his collection and forward his claim to authority. Cropper is so aggressive that he even begins to compete with Ash as the subject of his authority. He begins to fear that in his devotion to documenting the minutiae of Ash's life and career, he becomes "insubstantial" (Byatt 99), "as though he had no existence, no separate existence of his own" (Byatt 105). In the face of this, he sustains himself with the thought that he is "an important man. He wielded power: power of appointment, power of disappointment, power of the cheque book, power of Thoth<sup>10</sup> and the Mercurial access to the Arcana of the Stant Collection" (Byatt 99). He reassures himself by imagining he is a primary figure: the inventor, the controller, the initiate. And he goes to immoderate extremes in order to defy any compromise of this power or subordination, overt or implied, even to Ash.<sup>11</sup> Thus, not only does his own

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<sup>10</sup> Thoth is "a prominent god of Egyptian mythology, identified by the Greeks and Romans with Hermes or Mercury... He is the inventor of the arts and sciences... Sometimes he is shown holding in his hand the heart and tongue of Ra, the sun-god, to imply that he controls the intelligence of that great deity" (Benét 1117).

<sup>11</sup> Cropper is attempting to defy the alternate side of the dual nature of his position that is "installed from the start be the title of the novel" (Bronfen 126). While Cropper, a materialist, willingly embraces "possession" as it refers to "the active act of ownership, of taking control over, acquiring or dominating an object, and in so doing signaling both mastery and authority" he resists "the passive position--the state of being possessed" (Bronfen 126) that the word incorporates. The issue of the scholar's relationship to his subject/source is discussed at length in Chapter Four.

reputation and career take precedence over any scholarly ideals, Cropper attempts to defy, entirely, the idea that he is working in service of another man's reputation and he experiences his most exhilarating success when he is in the process of robbing Ash's grave, thereby trumping his competitors and exerting his ultimate power over his theoretical superior, Ash. While desecrating Ash's grave, he recognizes that

he was over some border of the permissible [but] everything was just fine. He was not a grey old scholar, smelling of the lamp, sitting on his fundament. He was *doing*, he would find, it was his destiny. (Byatt 493)

He is exhilarated because he can act, and he can win. His destiny is realizing his own power and greatness in his triumph over the "grey old scholar[s]" with whom he competes outwardly and within himself.

The other grey old scholars in the novel are those who either do not feel that they are able to compete or who resist competing. Blackadder and Beatrice Nest care about their scholarship and "feel responsible" (Byatt 221) for their work as it contributes, or fails to contribute, to the reputations of Ash and his wife. But they have been left behind by new theories that are pursued in a highly competitive environment and that require tactics and approaches that they find foreign and distasteful. Blackadder complains that

[the feminists] haven't any time for Randolph Ash. All they want is to read [his wife] Ellen's endless journal... They think Randolph Ash suppressed Ellen's writing and fed off her imagination. They'd have a hard time proving that, I think, if they were interested in proof, which I'm not sure they are... Poor old Beatrice began by wanting to show how self-

denying and supportive Ellen Ash was...and woke up to find that no one wanted self-denial and dedication any more...Poor Beatrice. One publication to her name, and a slim book called *Helpmeets* without irony doesn't go down well with today's feminists. (Byatt 31)

"Today's feminists" have rendered both Blackadder, in his work on Ash, and Beatrice, in the nature of her work on Ellen, obsolete. But the current state of feminist criticism is such that it has replaced not only them, but also the primary source material of Ash's poetry and Ellen's journal. The suspicion that Blackadder is confessing here is that the Ashes' writing has now become simply a vehicle to espouse feminist rhetoric. While Byatt's novel does not entirely support this idea, there is some sense that feminism has gotten off track. And while Blackadder and Beatrice Nest's habits of thought blind them to some interesting developments made by the theory they feel rejects them, Byatt makes it clear that theory is similarly blind to its own habits and proclivities. For, while Beatrice Nest remains so distrustful of "euphemism and indirect statement" (Byatt 115) that she can only be discomfited by the elusive nature of Ellen's journal, the feminists are proven wrong in their assumption that Ash suppressed his wife's writing or imagination. (While the old school's delicacy fails to "pin down" the journal, the new school pins down the wrong thing.) Ash specifically supports Christabel LaMotte and inspires her, a function the feminists attribute to Christabel's lesbian lover, while Ellen's native insecurity and socially determined passivity cause her to abandon her aspirations as a writer on her own.<sup>12</sup> She confesses in her journal

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<sup>12</sup> This suggestion is reinforced in the text, as Ivana Djordjević notes Ellen's "childlessness, a result of her terror of sexual intercourse, may well be seen as a punishment for her overall lack of courage" (60).



...I now think--it might have been better, might it not, to have held on to the desire to be a Poet? I could *never* write as well as Randolph, but then no one can or could, and so it was perhaps not worth considering as an objection to doing something. (Byatt 122)

Ellen finds purpose, instead, as her husband's "helpmeet," and although it does not ultimately fulfill her, it proves (along with her sisters named Grace, Patience and Faith) that she is a product of her time *as much as* current feminist practice and criticism is determined by present ideals and fixations.

The status of Christabel LaMotte's reputation in feminist circles depends a great deal on her lesbianism as a sign of female sexual independence. An edition of her poetry, published by "The Sapphic Press" bears the image of "two mediaeval women, bending to embrace each other" (Byatt 133), and her most famous poem *The Fairy Melusina* is valued by "the new feminists [because they] see Melusina in her bath as a symbol of self-sufficient female sexuality needing no poor males" (Byatt 34). LaMotte's lesbianism is fashionable, and thus marketable, in the current academic climate to the same degree as Ellen's self-sacrifice is unfashionable and unmarketable. In both cases, the influence of Randolph Henry Ash is misconstrued in order to pursue narratives built on the deliberate manipulations of historical gaps. The discovery of the letters detailing the affair between Ash and LaMotte fills some of these important gaps and ultimately exposes contemporary scholarship as being influenced to an unreasonable degree by wish-fulfillment rather than hypothesis. Thus, the scholars are forced to admit that "these letters have made us all look--in some ways--a little silly, in our summing-up of lives on the evidence we had" (Byatt 485). The scholars who best survive this discovery, however, are the ones who

have successfully avoided rash marketing strategies. Thus, Blackadder and Beatrice Nest become increasingly sympathetic as the novel progresses while Leonora's scholarship is seriously compromised and Cropper's assertiveness is exposed as hateful avarice.<sup>13</sup>

Maud, as one of the two main characters, and a feminist, is in practice and thought depicted as importantly independent from the grey old scholars in the novel as well as her fellow feminists as epitomized by Leonora Stern.<sup>14</sup> She clearly states that she "rather deplore[s] the modern feminist attitude to private lives" and insists instead that she is "a textual scholar" (Byatt 211), confessing

I very rarely feel any curiosity about Christabel's life--it's funny--I even feel a sort of squeamishness about things she might have touched, or places she might have been--it's the language that matters, isn't it, it's what went on in her mind-- (Byatt 55)

Unlike some of her fellow feminists, who capitalize on the available details of Christabel's private life, Maud is distinguished by her purely scholarly interest, an interest that is informed by, not subordinated to, her feminist beliefs. But she is also unlike the grey old scholars in that her scholarship has remained viable to the degree that it is aware and conversant with current theoretical trends. Unlike Blackadder and Nest who work in

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<sup>13</sup> This is made clear toward the end of the Quest, in Yorkshire, when Maud reads Cropper's account of Ash's trip to the area and Roland reads Leonora's criticism regarding LaMotte's apprehension of the landscape. Maud and Roland discover that their colleagues in fact "completely miss the point. Stern digresses about LaMotte and autoeroticism, and Cropper speculates about the fear of sterility and decline lurking behind Ash's new interest in nature's procreative powers, but the younger scholars are onto the truth, which is precisely the opposite: the Yorkshire journey was the occasion of an all-consuming affair between Ash and LaMotte" (Hulbert 58).

<sup>14</sup> The fact of both Maud and Roland's independence is also made clear by their continual yearning for solitude and is perhaps contextualized by Byatt's own assertion made in interview: "I don't want to be part of a school or movement... For me being part of a group would be the death of creativity, because I need to be separate from other people. I still believe in the liberal concept of the individual" (186).

a basement room amidst "the apparent chaos and actual order of...a drift of small paper slips in a valley between cliffs of furred-edged index cards and bulging mottled files" (Byatt 27), Maud works atop a tower<sup>15</sup> in a room that is "glass-walled on one side, and lined floor to ceiling with books on the others... books [that] were arranged rationally, thematically, alphabetically, and dust-free" (Byatt 40). These settings imply a clarity and efficiency of purpose to Maud's work that apparently elude both Blackadder and Nest. It is nonetheless the case that Maud's work, even as a "textual scholar," is on a poet that is regarded highly in the current academic climate.

Roland is like Maud in terms of the principles of his scholarship, but as an Ash scholar he does not display the same degree of purpose or confidence in an environment that places him, as he thinks of himself, "as a latecomer" (Byatt 10). Ash, as a male poet of long, difficult, dramatic verse, is not fashionable in competitive critical circles that are largely dominated by the cutthroat ideological battles that Leonora relishes.<sup>16</sup> Roland is not a grey old scholar, however. He has a passionate interest in Ash's poetry and it is stated, clearly setting up a specific parallel to Maud's beliefs, that

...[he] had never been much interested in Randolph Henry Ash's vanished body; he did not spend time visiting his house in Russell Street, or sitting

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<sup>15</sup> While a tower may be preferable as a working space to a basement, and while it intimates a clear-sightedness that the glass wall in Maud's office upholds, it is also clearly a symbol of solitude and entrapment reinforced by the invocation of Rapunzel in Christabel LaMotte's poem that opens the chapter. However, "Maud Bailey is trapped not so much by patriarchy, which has lost the power to affect her professional life, as by her feminism" (Djordjević 62), and thus the nature of her entrapment is that which most obviously distinguishes her from Blackadder and Nest, the privileged status of her academic allegiances.

<sup>16</sup> And, as Elisabeth Bronfen states, Roland's "old-fashioned scholarship, the decoding of citational references in Ash's poetry, lets him fail in the midst of an academic landscape interested almost exclusively in modish theoretical brilliance" (124). (However, I think, Bronfen similarly fails Roland when she allies him without qualification with "the male scholars," Blackadder and Cropper).

where he had sat, on stone garden seats; that was Cropper's style. What Roland liked was his knowledge of the movements of Ash's mind (Byatt 20)

Roland, unlike Cropper, is appropriately respectful in his regard for Ash's poetry. He is also aware of "his own huge ignorance" (Byatt 7), and though this humbles him, it does not like Blackadder make him "discouraged" (Byatt 9). Roland is instead "excited by the ferocious vitality and darting breadth of reference of [Ash's] work" (Byatt 8). He is, therefore, amongst, not one of, the grey old scholars continuing work on Randolph Ash. He is instead (and again like Maud) a self-confessed "old-fashioned textual critic" (Byatt 50). This is an attribute on which he clearly prides himself as it separates him from some of the vagaries of theoretical critics. As an Ash scholar, however, Roland is nonetheless forced to acknowledge the advantage held by theoretical critics in the present highly competitive and politicized academic climate. After being overlooked for a position in his department, he concedes that the successful candidate, Fergus Wolff, was in the "right field which was literary theory" (Byatt 14). But he notes

[Fergus'] track record was less consistent [than Roland's], [Fergus] could be brilliant or bathetic, but never dull and right, [Fergus] was loved by his teachers whom he exasperated and entranced, where Roland excited no emotion more passionate than solid approbation. (Byatt 14)

Thus, to use Leonora's term, Fergus is "sexy" in an environment that values marketability (in the "right field") over consistency or proficiency.<sup>17</sup> The value of Fergus' popularity

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<sup>17</sup> Roland's suspicion here that suggests that the current popularity of theory-driven scholarship may have more to do with its flamboyant nature, and thus its marketability, is reflected by Byatt in an article entitled

over Roland's somewhat old-fashioned ideals is clearly contextualized over the course of the novel as Roland ultimately discovers textual evidence that dramatically alters the entire body of scholarship of two significant poets while Fergus grapples with "the challenge...[of] deconstruct[ing] something that had apparently already deconstructed itself" (Byatt 32), thereby reducing disorder and a lack of meaning into still further chaos and meaninglessness.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, from the start, it is made clear to the reader that both Roland and Maud are motivated not by competitive fervour but "...the desire for knowledge" (Byatt 82). They are not being driven by "professional greed"; they come to understand that, instead, it is "something more primitive" (Byatt 238) that motivates them. Thus, Byatt makes it clear that Roland and Maud *deserve*, in some sense, to be the ones to discover the Ash and LaMotte correspondence. Initially, the justification for their interest in the letters is established by the merit of their disinterested scholarly principles, and the genuine nature of their love for the poetry of Ash and LaMotte respectively. But their motivation is fortified as their involvement in the lives of Ash and LaMotte intensifies.

Maud is actually, in some fashion, related to Christabel LaMotte, and the letters are discovered in the ancestral home of George Bailey, a distant relative of Maud's. George, suspicious and distrustful of scholars since a confrontation with Leonora, allows Maud, and with her, Roland, to look through Christabel's old things "since it's all in the

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"Reading, writing, studying. Some questions about changing conditions for writers and readers" in which she asks "How much has the new postmodernist interest in seductive narrative forms to do with theories of narrative and how much with a desire to write saleable books?" (7).

<sup>18</sup> Thus, although *Possession* "is full of the fashionable rhetoric of literary theory...it soon becomes clear that [Byatt's] facility with the professional jargon is accompanied by a mounting frustration with it" (Hulbert 56).

family" (Byatt 81). Upon the discovery of the letters, however, George Bailey asks, "...are you the *best people*--to trust with the reading?--" (Byatt 90). The reader, having thus far been briefly introduced to the other experts in the field, is prepared to defend Maud and Roland's claim to the letters for the reasons outlined above. And while Maud and Roland also feel themselves best qualified to determine the importance of the letters, they are struck by the consuming nature of their desire to do so. Roland marvels "I don't know why I feel so *possessive* about the damned things. They're not mine." And Maud answers hesitantly "it's because...they're private" (Byatt 91). Keeping in mind the ideals of scholarly pursuit by which Roland and Maud are initially characterized, they begin, in the name of this inarticulate sense of entitlement, to behave according to its dictates and thereby trespass against the dictates of proper scholarly conduct in which they believe.<sup>19</sup> This causes them moments of anxiety where they are called upon to defend what they themselves recognize as indefensible conduct. After Roland confesses to Maud on their first meeting that he stole the original copies of the first letter (the initial clue to a connection between Ash and LaMotte), Maud asks him "I suppose they might represent a considerable academic scoop. For you" (Byatt 50). Roland attempts to defend himself, crying

It wasn't like *that* at all, not like that. It was something *personal*. You wouldn't know...I don't go in for that sort of--it wasn't *profit*--I'll put them back next week--I wanted them to be a secret. Private. And to do the work. (Byatt 50)

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<sup>19</sup> Ann Hulbert similarly notes that "the Quest for the poets' hidden passion [becomes] a formal challenge to the scholars' habits" (57).

Byatt thus is very careful to make it evident to the reader that Maud and Roland are not indulging themselves in any sort of competitive strategizing. They are not planning a coup to forward their reputations and establish their careers. They are being driven by something more instinctive than such self-conscious concerns and each time they are confronted by their academic scruples, it serves to further contextualize their conduct in the face of their evident and appropriate principles. After gaining access to the letters, Roland reads them apprehensively, aware that "the truth was...these busy passionate letters, had never been written to him to read--as [the poems] had. They had been written for Christabel LaMotte" (Byatt 131). And as they are pushed to even greater extremes, their self-consciousness increases

...we are mad. And bad. I lied shamelessly to Leonora. I've done worse--  
I nicked Ariane Le Minier's address when she wasn't looking. I'm as bad  
as Cropper and Blackadder. All scholars are a bit mad. All obsessions are  
dangerous. And this one has got a bit out of hand. (Byatt 332)

But at every turn, they are comforted and feel justified by the understanding that "[this] is our Quest" (Byatt 328); until finally, Byatt makes the nature of this (capital q) Quest clear. Neither Maud nor Roland is behaving madly, for, in the end, though they may be behaving *like* obsessed scholars, they are not behaving *as* obsessed scholars. Both Maud and Roland are indeed on "personal," "secret," "private" quests; Roland discovers that his Quest has led him to find himself as a writer, and Maud discovers that all along she has been exploring "the truth--of [her] own origins" (Byatt 503).

In their pursuit to uncover the truth about the connection between Ash and LaMotte, Maud and Roland learn that Christabel gave birth to a child as a result of her

affair with Ash, and that Christabel's sister raised the child as her niece. This "niece" is Maud's direct ancestor. Thus, Maud discovers that she herself is a direct descendent of the affair between the two poets. Her discovery of the truth, therefore, becomes "strangely appropriate" (Byatt 503) and immediately validates all of her actions. And, perhaps even more importantly, her involvement and unearthing of the truth redresses a wrong done to her great-great-great-grandmother, Christabel LaMotte. Ash and LaMotte attempt to keep their affair very private. They take great pains to hide the fact of their affair, and thus keep the matter of their personal lives away from the "vultures" (443) or "ghouls" (462), referring to interested biographers and scholars who would, without respect or compunction, make their private affairs matters of public consumption. With specific orders from her husband, Ellen Ash burns certain pieces of evidence concerning the affair and buries others with her husband in his grave, to give them "*...a sort of duration... A demi-eternity*" believing that "if the ghouls dig them up again... Then justice will perhaps be done to *her* when I am not here to see it" (Byatt 462). Maud is the concrete manifestation of this justice, both as Christabel's descendent and as the rightful heir to her letters and poetry.<sup>20</sup> Upon her death, Christabel leaves "her papers and poems" to her daughter because "she believe[s] strongly in the importance of handing

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<sup>20</sup> The full import of the reparation Maud embodies is only made evident at the very end of the narrative. Byatt appends to the fully realized action of her narrative a short chapter entitled "Postscript 1868." This postscript details the meeting between Randolph Henry Ash and the little girl he recognizes as his daughter, Maia. The fact of this meeting satisfies both "coherence and closure," which Byatt earlier identifies as "deep human desires that are presently unfashionable" (422), in a manner that is more satisfying and consistent with the Romance genre, and that explicitly defies current fashions in thought that "*require the aleatory or the multivalent*" (Byatt 421). Ash was not, after all, kept from the knowledge that he had a daughter, and therefore progeny, and thus, "the secret [he] took to his grave is not the one the academic characters disinter" (Sabine 135). Ash does not require the justice provided by the discovery that Maud is his descendent. Instead, the justice required is for Christabel who, knowing her daughter, is redeemed by Maud, not only symbolically as her descendent, but more specifically as a scholar.



things on through the female line." Her daughter exhibits little interest in them, instead, as it is expressed by a disinterested observer, "that has had to wait for [Maud]" (Byatt 435). Indeed, it is LaMotte's expressed hope, in her final letter to Ash, that "*she* will not die, *my Melusina, some discerning reader will save her...*" (Byatt 501). Maud, her descendent, is this discerning reader, linked to her ancestor by a fidelity to words as well as by her bloodline. It is important, therefore, that Maud participates in uncovering the truth as Christabel's direct descendent, and not simply as an obsessed scholar, but it is fitting also that Maud *is* a scholar, and a principled one, who is capable of expressing adequate intellectual interest, understanding and sympathy for LaMotte's work.

While Maud's inheritance makes her "a central figure in [the] story" of Ash and LaMotte, Roland is still forced to recognize that he "got into it by stealing" (Byatt 505). His involvement in the private lives of the two poets cannot be justified as Maud's involvement can and, as a result, Roland finds himself estranged from his work on Ash's poetry. He recognizes

The pursuit of the letters had distanced him from Ash as they had come closer to Ash's life. In the days of his innocence Roland had been, not a hunter but a reader, and had felt superior to Mortimer Cropper, and in some sense equal to Ash, or anyway related to Ash, who had written for him to read intelligently, as best he could. Ash had not written the letters for Roland... Roland's find had turned out to be a sort of loss... (Byatt 470)

Roland's scholarly pursuit as a textual critic has been irreparably compromised by his investigation into Ash's private life.<sup>21</sup> Roland's loss, however, is as important a justification for his conduct as is Maud's gain. To the same degree that George Bailey seems to forecast the nature of Maud's quest by allowing her access to LaMotte's room (and thereby the letters) because "it's all in the family" (Byatt 81), Roland's quest is foreshadowed by his girlfriend Val's slightly accusatory concern. Val confesses to Roland as their relationship is falling apart, "I suppose I envy you, piecing together old Ash's world-picture. Only where does that leave *you*...? What's *your* world-picture?" (Byatt 20). The private nature of Roland's investigation into the Ash-LaMotte correspondence leads to the construction of his private world-picture. This is importantly connected to his estrangement from his scholarship when he begins "writing lists of words that resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory" (Byatt 431). Because Roland can no longer regard Ash's poetry with any intellectual distance, he can no longer produce criticism. But Roland recognizes that "Ash had started him on this quest..." (Byatt 472), and he discovers that

What Ash said... was that the lists were the important thing, the words that named things, the language of poetry. He had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there... What had happened to him was that the ways in which it *could* be

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<sup>21</sup> However, despite Roland's momentary self-doubt, Roland is still importantly distinct from Cropper in his role as "collector." For "whereas Roland's encounter with Ash's objects inspires him to creative action, Cropper's collection is ensconced in airless sterility, and his writing on Ash does not gain insight from possession of those objects" (Wilkinson 104).

said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not." (Byatt 473)

Roland, on the quest to uncover the truth of the connection between Ash and LaMotte, is forced to re-contextualize much of his understanding of Ash's poetry in the light of new biographical information.<sup>22</sup> He is forced to reckon with the connection between Ash's world-view and his world. He discovers that language, though inadequate and indeterminate, does nonetheless express content and have meaning and power. Thus, after he and Maud uncover the past, turning back to Ash's poetry, Roland can see that "Christabel [is] the Muse and Proserpina and... she [is] not, and this seemed to be so interesting and *apt*, once he had understood it, that he laughed out loud" (Byatt 472). Roland's intimate encounter with Ash's life makes him view the poems, not as isolated exercises in an indeterminate language, but as powerful efforts at understanding and expressing the poet's sense of the world. The result is a less sterile, more engaged understanding of the whole field of literature, one that for Roland demands a more direct participation. Roland discovers that he is not a critic or a theorist, because, on his quest he had not been pursuing critical information or theoretical principles, he had been pursuing knowledge. His pursuit of knowledge leads him *back* to language. Thus, it is important that Roland is an academic when he begins to pursue things outside the strict realm of "current" or "fashionable" academic practice, for it is because of his education that Roland has become alienated from meaning, from his purpose as an academic, from his sense of himself and his place in the world, and from language. Roland is "a child of

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<sup>22</sup> Giuliana Giobbi affirms that this allows Roland to "[discover] other facets and weaknesses of the idolized Victorian poet" (48) and thus frees him from being unduly influenced by Ash's poetic voice.

his time" (Byatt 246); he has been "trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject" (Byatt 9); he has been trained to question his ability to understand or express what Ash and his Quest show him "*is*" (Byatt 465). Thus, "formerly believing his self to be written by codes, [Roland] now feels that he has a real identity as a poet, an agent who uses words rather than an illusion who is constituted by them" (Holmes 329).

Therefore, in the midst of the obsessive and competitive "game" of scholarship, Roland and Maud become distinct to themselves and each other because their quest has not been for academic glory or political leverage. Amidst scholars, their quest becomes distinct as a quest for knowledge, so at the end of their narrative when the mysteries have been solved and they are together "the whole world [has] a strange new smell... of bitten apples" (Byatt 507).<sup>23</sup> Maud and Roland have been able to succeed on the strength of alternate modes of support that have fueled their scholarship with a sense of purpose. Their reinforced sense of purpose allows them to transcend the pettiness of competition. They do not function in the narrative as non-scholars, but as super-scholars (or even "*supra*"), because they are motivated by concerns that place them outside the influence of the "cut-throat... battles" (Byatt 311) that propel current critical inquiry. Byatt's novel, then, is itself posited against the contemporary fashion insofar as it has a moral; it rewards those who pursue knowledge, and exposes those who pursue self-gain disguised as knowledge, and it retains the value of pursuit without validating careerism or academic "climbing."

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<sup>23</sup> Importantly, these apples operate in a dual sense symbolically in that they have both biblical and mythological resonance that, interestingly, conflates knowledge (the apple in the Garden of Eden) and fertility (the Hesperidean apples about which Ash writes). This reaffirms the distinction made between

Both *Swann* and *Possession* depict the university as an environment plagued by an aggressively competitive impulse, where practical (career-driven) concerns have overwhelmed idealism and the pursuit of knowledge, and *contending* has become the primary objective of scholarship. The scholars, for the most part, are neither hateful nor corrupt, but their environment is such that they are not able to realize or explore any true intellectual idealism or genuine respect either for their subject or their fellows. Thus, both novels create scenarios extraordinary to the general scene of scholarship that allow the scholars to demonstrate the attributes that become lost in such an aggressive climate. Both novels depict a scene where competition has become superfluous in the face of an emergency. Both have scholars gathering outside the university environment, and outside their capacity as rivals, to "save" literature. Whether it is to save Swann's poetry from annihilation or Ash and LaMotte from the fanatical materialism of Cropper, the scholars are called upon to cooperate as fellow experts and thus transcend conflict. These utopian endings locate an ideal for scholarship and effectively contrast this ideal to the more common conditions of disillusion and frustration in the current state of academics. Disillusion and frustration are closely linked to the university's loss of its sense of purpose as it has become estranged from its traditional values, and been taken over by theories that are rendered incomplete by their own reliance on principles of uncertainty. Sarah grapples with her sense of purpose and ultimately finds it outside the university in her personal life; Maud and Roland also ultimately find support in their scholarship through alternate means, Maud in her family history and Roland as a writer. In all of

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Cropper's sterile materialism and Roland and Maud's quest which leads them to productive knowledge that both engages and redresses the past as it opens them to "fruitful" self-discovery.

these cases, the characters recover their idealism insofar as they *escape* the campus. The scholars as *people* are redeemed, while scholarship remains in a more dubious state. For in the absence of alternate modes of purpose and support, the motive force of scholarship is competition. Without idealism to temper this competition, without a genuine connection to the purpose of the university or the purpose of scholarship, the practical concerns of this competition begin to overwhelm the scene of scholarship and scholars are called upon to do what is feasible in an aggressive climate rather than what is valuable in a supportive one.

## Chapter Two -- Corporation and Community

As the university has become increasingly estranged from a viable sense of purpose, it has become increasingly difficult for the university community to justify or explain its activities to the government and society that have traditionally supported it. The crisis of confidence suffered by academics would not take on real crisis proportions if it did not also affect the public's idea of the university and thus its continued role in the culture. Indeed, it seems clear that "an internal legitimation struggle concerning the nature of the knowledge produced in the humanities... would not take on crisis proportions were it not accompanied by an external legitimation crisis" (Readings 1). In any case, "crisis" becomes the catchword of discussions on the current state and status of the university even when that state of crisis is being denied. Jerry Herron in *Universities and The Myth of Cultural Decline* asserts that crisis rhetoric is used as "a potent instrument of control," but admits

Whether the crisis is "real" or not is beside the point; the fact is that, for a great number of people, it *feels* real, and that feeling translates into new demands, new expectations, new (and profit-bearing) opportunities, and an unprecedented degree of attention presently being concentrated on the academy. (45)

As this attention intensifies and threatens to interfere, academics are asked to defend their principles and define their purposes and often, it seems, they are unable to respond in terms that are deemed intelligible or defensible by a disenchanted public and dismayed bureaucrats. And, while the pressure exists to simply return to traditional purposes in

order to make some statement of defense for the university, it is often felt that the current state of scholarship makes a reversion to those principles difficult if not impossible for academics when the very substance of traditional purposes has been so vigorously challenged. Thus, it becomes a sort of

...double bind [for] the practicing professional who is bound to the traditional dreams of humanistic studies (and who is reminded assiduously of these by ambitious public servants and academic, crisis politicians), but who would get laughed out of town--and out of print--if he or she took them seriously. (Herron 62)

While this double-bind augments the confusion for academics, (and while it certainly must be considered a force driving them toward the dubious behaviour depicted in the previous chapter), it also alienates them further from a public that often cannot understand or bear witness to the substance and/or meaning of the university's rejection of its own traditions. For insofar as complicated theories and virulent competition, in some fashion, define the now "normal" functioning state of the university, the public has grown increasingly bewildered and, as a result, increasingly intolerant of an institution they are not asked to understand, but which they are asked to, either directly or indirectly, support. Consequently, aggressive anti-university/anti-education sentiment begins to gain people's attention and their respect, as the degree to which people do not understand the university, seems to relate to the degree that they *do* understand its detractors. Thus, critics are forced to concede that

It is not hard to see, in a period of aggravated cost-consciousness, how it [becomes] possible to sell the notion that what students and taxpayers are



paying for is not knowledge but rather debates among people who adhere to differing interpretations but who cannot even agree on what would count as a ground for deciding among those interpretations. If opinion is always contingent, why should we subsidize professionals to produce it?  
(Menand 215)

Questions of this sort will continue to be articulated and will increase in volume, it is feared, until someone can provide an answer that will adequately represent the position and purpose of the university community. In the absence of such an answer, the notion of crisis becomes largely accepted and propagated both inside and outside university walls. And, no matter to what level it actually exists, when a crisis is so widely *perceived* it becomes in its own way self-perpetuating. It is at least troublesome, for example, when Member of Parliament, Ted White, who represents the riding that includes the University of British Columbia (one of at least the top five, if not the top three, most prestigious universities in Canada), declares in response to a bid of support for SSHRC,

I cannot conceive of any way in which research in [the humanities]... contributes to any understanding of Canadian society or the challenges we face as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century... Research in such fields, as far as my constituents are concerned, constitutes a personal pastime, and has no benefit to Canadian taxpayers (Dimson 18)

This is a troubling statement in more ways than one as Mr. White suggests that either an academic entity like the University of British Columbia is irrelevant to his constituents who immediately surround it or, perhaps even more problematically, that UBC *itself* assumes the irrelevance of the humanities in relation to its more "important" activities.

Either way, the fact that Mr. White includes the university in his statement, implicates it, by demonstrating the degree to which it has failed to either retain or represent the benefit of the humanities to its own community.<sup>1</sup>

Jaroslav Pelikan notes that the university, like the church, is "often dismissed by those who claim to speak on behalf of 'the real world'," and that it is dismissed as a "museum piece from another, simpler era, still [a] good place perhaps for the young to learn something about the past but definitely not the place to look for guidance about the real world and its future (12). So Mr. White assumes that the study of philosophy, history, language and literature are backward-gazing, that they are studies in antiquity for its own sake, and that they can only hope to satisfy a type of personal craving for or interest in a lost world. This is problematic on its own terms, but perhaps the most notable danger of Mr. White's remark is the confidence with which he states his opinion as obvious fact. For although his assertion is framed as a confession of ignorance ("I cannot conceive..."), it is clear that Mr. White is attempting to point out the obvious lack of coherence, relevance and insight in the humanities not in himself. Indeed, the fact that Mr. White uses this statement shows that he is unaware of even the possibility of his own failure of conceptual power. This reveals the extent to which he, and as he claims, the people who support him, do not understand that the university even has any purpose outside of its more pragmatic, and apparently technologically sophisticated, social functions.

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<sup>1</sup> I explore the relationship between the university and the public in Chapter Five.

This must, in large part, be a failure on the part of the university, and it is perhaps a consequence of this kind of ignorance regarding any larger function of the university that

Colleges and universities increasingly are being asked by state agencies, alumni, donors, foundations, legislatures, and the public at large to explain how faculty members spend their time, to account for their activities, and to give some demonstration of how well or how poorly they perform their duties. (Lucas 234)

"Accountability" then becomes a certain manifestation of the university in crisis, as it represents a way for those outside the university community to demand answers the university seems hesitant to give. While this hesitation can, and indeed, in many cases, *should* be understood as a necessary consequence of the university community's unwillingness to provide simple and reductive answers, it is often misunderstood as more scholarly bumbling and, as a result, the demand continues and increases for more external control. But, misapprehension regarding the university and its past and possible continued purposes can often involve an important misrepresentation of its essential nature, and critics are asked to contend with depictions of the university that do not, in their minds, adequately represent it:

The metaphor for academic accountability most often invoked combines the notion of an institution of higher learning as a production unit, a factory perhaps, together with that of the college or university as a corporate enterprise engaged in retail sales. The school as a business "produces" knowledge, which it then offers for sale... For their part,

students as tuition-paying "customers" are said to be making an "investment" in the education sought, hoping for an adequate "return" on that investment. (Lucas 209)

This metaphor is used to suggest that the defining relationship in the university, that between teacher and student, is most importantly an economic one. Instead, it is argued that, while the fact that money does indeed pass from student to institution (although, we should be clear, never between student and teacher: the teacher does not make more or less money either for "customers" served, or for "customer"-satisfaction), does make this metaphor seem applicable, it is grossly reductive in that it misapprehends the nature of the "product" of the university. Although the pun on "produce" in the above quote suggests that the university is dealing in product, what the university produces is not material, no matter the degree to which it may be *translated* into material gain. Outside of, perhaps, its bookstore, the university is not engaged in retail sales, and therefore this metaphor misrepresents the university more dangerously than it attempts to represent one of its functional aspects.

More importantly, the depiction of the university as a production unit involves a dangerous re-interpretation of the proper "use" of the university, because, whatever else it is good for, the university is inadequately prepared, structured or controlled to be *simply* a job-training centre.<sup>2</sup> These re-interpretations result in further misapprehensions of the

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<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting that the university does not function as a job-training centre, but that the ideal of education is something larger and more varied than simply a job-training centre implies. That is, the university was built upon and operates with the idea that it is conveying something more than information, that it is providing its students with the background and discipline to know something about the nature of information, thought and knowledge in a much larger sense. With this in mind, the university is not an ideal job-training centre for it can easily be outstripped by training centres that progress more quickly and efficiently without the added encumbrance of, for example, a critical or theoretical education.

past, present and future function of the university. For example, Ken MacQueen declares in his article entitled "Education Is for the Birds Unless It Offers a Good Return on Investment" that "Education is a commodity... What doesn't sell any more, are old ideals of education for education's sake" (as qtd. in Emberley 156). But education cannot be fairly termed a commodity; Mr. MacQueen chooses to depict education in this manner because he apparently wants to suggest that the universities are not doing their job, when, in actual fact, he is misinterpreting that job. What Mr. MacQueen calls "the old ideals" are so described because they are not consistent with the university as a production unit, which suggests that, education is useful only as it translates into monetary gain. Mr. MacQueen assumes that education otherwise is *only* "education for education's sake." His reference is to Cardinal Newman's idea that "knowledge [is] its own end" (99), but, in his dismissal, Mr. MacQueen either fails to understand or fairly represent the implications of Newman's idea here. MacQueen's argument suggests that without monetary gain, there is only the memorization of information: the dates of wars and Shakespearean soliloquies.<sup>3</sup> But as Pelikan points out in his study of Newman:

It is difficult to get anywhere in any discussion of knowledge, whether as an end in itself or as a means to some other end, without introducing the distinction between knowledge and information... whereas *information* often "suggests no more than a collection of data or facts either discrete or integrated into a body of knowledge," the term *knowledge* "applies not

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<sup>3</sup> The working assumption here is that education is more than simply this. Education is most useful and most necessary as it transcends bare information and proves to be have greater and more varied uses than material gain. It is useful as it trains a person to think critically, and to discipline his/her mind. As the

only to a body of facts gathered by study, investigation, observation, or experience but also to a body of ideas acquired by inference from such facts or accepted on good grounds as truth." (34-5)

It seems unlikely that Mr. MacQueen would include knowledge, ideas and truth in his dismissal of education for its own sake. Mr. MacQueen instead reduces education to the transmission of information, and by so doing reduces the status of the university, a reduction that is then explicitly connected to the need for a university "clean-up." As a result, it seems, of this kind of thinking, it becomes widely feared in literature on the current state of the university that bids for a clean-up are often much more radical than they seem, since they often concurrently reduce the purpose of the university to tangible and more easily quantifiable operations that conform readily to the factory model.

Promises of efficiency and greater cost-effectiveness may make this seem attractive, but the principles of limitation, it is feared, are often too narrowly focused and they threaten to destroy fundamentally important, though not particularly lucrative, parts of the university.<sup>4</sup> Such that, as Emberley states, this becomes not a clean-up, but a demolition disguised:

The new clean-up would perhaps be at home in the business of military enterprise or in government bureaucracy...[but] its intolerance for the university's natural (and healthy) ambiguity and free play has the capacity to destroy that institution's fundamental character. (14)

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American psychologist B.F. Skinner once said: "Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten" (Knowles 721).

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is feared that "utilitarianism is a threat to utility... a rigid application of the utilitarian criterion could deprive the next generation of the very means it will need for the tasks that it will face,

The fear is that by depicting the university's multiple (and indeed sometimes contradictory) purposes as muddle and inefficiency, reformers demonstrate their desire to force it to conform to new, and more efficient, corporate standards. This, in effect, asks the university (or, more probably, *tells* it) to defy its own institutional mandates (however loosely they may be constructed), and results in a threat to the university that, perhaps ironically, fulfills all the established criteria for crisis.

Thus, changes are being made to the university in response to crisis, in the name of crisis, and in the end, to perpetuate crisis.<sup>5</sup> An integral part of these changes, as depicted in both the non-fiction writing on the university and the university novel, is the move away from individual professorial power to formalized bureaucratic management as "a substitute for government's former trust in the ability of universities to govern themselves" (Thorne, Cuthbert 174). As a result of this change, "the central figure of the University is no longer the professor who is both scholar and teacher" but "the administrator" (Readings 8), who might well be neither. This further alienates scholars from any ideal or purpose in their scholarship as increasingly "...higher education is being told what it ought to do and how it ought to do it by politicians and education bureaucrats who don't teach and research, and who don't know how we do it" (Pratt 38). When "managerialists" step in and attempt to control and modify the university environment, further confusion results as professors conceive of the university in ways

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which will not be the tasks that this generation faces and which therefore cannot be dealt with by those particular instrumentalities that this generation has identified as 'useful'" (Pelikan 34).

<sup>5</sup> John Snobelen immediately pops to mind as a most compelling example of this phenomenon. The one-time Minister of Education in Ontario (1995-1997), who came to the position as a highschool dropout, accidentally got himself on record declaring that he intended to "create a crisis" in education in order to justify radical changes in the public secondary school system, changes that have left the highschools in an

that often specifically reject the conceptions of bureaucrats who hold to the "accountability model" to justify their increased control and extend their own power. And although managerialists see "the route to efficiency as standardization, measurement and bureaucratic control" (Thorne, Cuthbert 174), the "sheer weight of managerial processes imposed upon the institutions by the funding councils...illustrates the paradox in using 'managerialist' forms of bureaucratic control to achieve greater efficiency" (Thorne, Cuthbert 175). Indeed, "At several Ivy League universities it has taken more administrators to recommend and achieve the closure of small departments than there were teachers and other employees in those disciplines" (Woodring 121). Thus, the university begins to struggle under the burden of accountability in more ways than one: "There are currently 2,200 faculty in Canada without teaching responsibility, "serving" the university. They are paid upwards of \$100,000 a year to monitor the accountability of the university" (Emberley 138). This at a time when departments are being amalgamated or closed down and universities are depending more and more on part-time or adjunct faculty in the name of cost-effectiveness. The irony seems clear. It may be one thing if nobody cares about Homer anymore and nobody wants to pay somebody to talk about him. It is quite another to give that teacher's money to the person who is eliminating him for efficiency's sake.

Thus, it is widely argued that the corporate or business model, with its profit orientation and top-down management, simply does not work for the university, and the menace this approach embodies is increasingly evident as the university is forced to

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actual crisis, weakened and reeling, and, not surprisingly, vulnerable to accusations that its students are falling behind in the global market.



conform to an idea of itself that too often offends every conceptual vestige of idealism left in the university community. When "transactions cost perspectives suggest that markets are efficient when there is relatively little ambiguity about performance" (Thorne, Cuthbert 177), there should be little doubt that the university will be, by its very nature, inefficient. If the university can only be understood with any confidence, at this point in history, at its most basic level, its most basic level is that the university is a locus of knowledge and education. And knowledge and education often demand ambiguity as they must encourage more questions than they can ever deliver. If the greatest wisdom comes from the admission that one knows nothing, then ignorance must find its root in the type of bottom-line certainty espoused by White, MacQueen and others.

If the call for accountability results in external controls bearing down on the university and causing confusion, terror and muddle with cost-effectiveness plans and the inappropriate language and ideology of corporate enterprise, the result inside the university is one consistent with a system under siege. The editorial introduction in the second annual *Maclean's* magazine university survey, a rating of Canadian universities brought into existence and made popular by the accountability craze, states that "the post-secondary system is... a system under severe siege" (Doyle 1). While under siege, people run for cover, and, in the university, "cover" in many cases has been manifested in either a persistent ignorance of the state of the university in crisis (with the muddled professor with his dusty head in his books as its primary caricature) or in mad scrambles for power (with the bloodthirsty, often feminist, scholar, blaring rhetoric as its exemplar). In a climate that encourages both responses, it does not seem surprising that the university community is no longer one defined by the security of a long-standing and indisputably

valued profession written about by Snow. This is not now a profession marked by an assumed authority or confidence. Instead, professors, often no longer cognizant of either respect or support from the bureaucracy that is increasingly displacing them, are required increasingly to solidify their positions in the university in terms of the corporate mode of power. It is argued, therefore, that

The breakdown of collegiality in [Higher Education], where it has occurred, can be largely attributed to a breakdown of the insulation from outside pressures, as expansion of public support for [Higher Education] brought with it irresistible demands for greater accountability for how resources were used. (Thorne, Cuthbert 189)

Under the accountability model, and in a corporate environment, scholars are not allowed the freedom or space to pursue their projects independently. As a result, competition becomes increasingly *necessary* to the environment, and instead of scholars working to forward the cause of knowledge, the university promotes careerists working in an environment that encourages the cut-throat behaviour and survivalist tactics more consistent with a competitive business environment.<sup>6</sup> The effect of this environment in the university manifests itself in various ways, with scholars who do and say, study and publish, what they must in order to stay ahead of the fashions of the day, in order to stay competitive and attain power (as we saw in both *Swann* and *Possession*) or in what Catherine Chambliss describes as "near-classic displays of psychological displacement," whereupon some professors, who consider

Talk of fiscal crisis... a manipulative ploy on the part of deans and other leaders to stifle dissent and keep things placid[,]... deflect their frustration and anxiety... Absorbed in territorial skirmishes with colleagues, faculty members expend their energies waging interdepartmental and interdivisional battles over scarce resources rather than working together to find ways of utilizing more effectively what is available... (Chambliss 2)

As a result, the university environment becomes increasingly fractured and increasingly political.<sup>7</sup> And this creates a situation where "Control is everywhere, but nobody seems to be in charge" (Herron 118). This becomes a problem for everyone working in such a hostile environment, but it also perpetuates the problem to which it is responding, for "...an institution divided against itself, its members even disagreeing with one another over the rules of discourse, cannot respond effectively to external demands that it remain accountable for its practices" (Lucas 218).

Thus, the problem, such as it can be located, exists on two levels. Both levels encourage and entrench an environment that has become dangerously politicized, and that threatens the university community from without and from within. Without, there are the bureaucrats who are responding to public and political pressure and who insist on placing the university on a corporate model that offends the nature, let alone the ideals, of scholarship. While within, there is the siege mentality created by the corporate model

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<sup>6</sup> For example, research funded by corporations places private interests above the public interests of discovery, such that corporations have actively discouraged publication (along with other means of sharing knowledge), long considered a hallmark of the academic community.

that has professors jockeying for position and control, creating antagonism and fragmentation.

This finds purchase in the university novel as it manifests itself in what Woodring describes as "a seriocomic scenario in which sodden firefighters spray water on each other while the house burns down" (93). In *Swann and Possession*, individual characters confront the loss of purpose and effect of competition on the current state of scholarship. In Richard Russo's *Straight Man* and Ishmael Reed's *Japanese By Spring*, the university community is depicted as one beset by power politics that increasingly estrange it from any vestiges of scholarly principle. In these two novels, the characters are disillusioned, and their environment is much more actively disillusioning. There is no common ground and no common set of principles to unite, let alone define, the embattled faculty. In both novels, the embittered professors are under siege by external powers that threaten to expose the current sense of decay lurking inside the university community, such that the idea of the university is being wronged both by internal and external forces. While in *Swann and Possession*, there are morally earnest scholars who attempt to hold onto their academic ideals in a sometimes hostile environment, in the university community as depicted by Russo and Reed, the problems are more pervasive, more systematic. Indeed, in Russo's *Straight Man*, a lingering sense of idealism signifies an individual's failure to fit in or define himself as a staunch member of the university, while in *Japanese by Spring*, the characters' eagerness to involve themselves with the university is evidence of an utter lack of attachment to any ideological base. In both cases, the university is

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<sup>7</sup> I wish to cite the definition of this word, in hopes of clarifying what can become an empty term. Merriam Webster defines politics as "the art or science concerned with winning and holding control over

depicted as a place ill-suited for idealism as it is being overwhelmed by a hostile corporate presence in the upper echelons of power and torn apart by the bitter feuds of disillusioned faculty who sacrifice idealism in the mad scramble to keep their jobs.

In *Straight Man*, the university is represented through the eyes of William Henry Devereaux, Jr., (Hank), son of a famous literary critic, and embattled chair of the English department at West Central Pennsylvania University. Hank is working in a department clearly suffering from the siege mentality of current academics. His colleagues are bitterly feuding and his superiors are raising the axe, and threatening "a purge...one that would reach into the tenured ranks" (Russo 8). The central figure of bureaucratic power is the campus executive officer, a title that notably condenses to the acronym CEO. His name is Dickie Pope, which suggests certainly the ludicrous nature of the man's power, and his hiring, we are told, "occasioned a wave of paranoia" in the university because "his strengths were in the areas of budget and fund-raising, not academics" (Russo 112). It is Dickie Pope's stated agenda to make West Central Pennsylvania University into a college to "survive the decade", which, to Dickie, means making it "lean and mean. Efficient" (Russo 162). Lean, mean and efficient are the standards of conduct most often associated with businesses with an easily delimited product and product base, not with a university education that is meant to encourage its students and scholars to embrace problems, pursue complexities and question certainties. Of course, the project of lean efficiency is consistent with a man not interested in academics and whose strengths instead concern "bottom-line thinking." This is symbolically supported in the novel by the rumour that Dickie arrived at the CEO's office without any books to fill the built-in bookcases that

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government" and "competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power and leadership."

lined the room. "Slightly embarrassed," he hired someone to buy him books to fill them and had them snuck in "like a shipment of stolen VCRs" (Russo 155). The comparison here between the books and stolen VCRs is important in that it reduces the books to symbols of cultural capital, so that Dickie's book-lined room becomes important as it "befit[s] the chief executive officer of an institution of higher learning" (Russo 155) and suggests rather than evidences his erudition and prestige. Thus, Dickie's books can be compared to stolen property as Dickie has basically stolen the prestige they carry without having to invest in their substantive value. The books make Dickie *look* the part, like accessories, even though Dickie is not required to fulfill it in its original conception. The fact that the chief executive officer's office is lined with *built-in* bookcases that reach floor to ceiling suggests that the traditional conception of the university saw the "CEO" as someone consistent with the principles and preoccupations of book-learning that the university is meant to represent and is supposed to hold as its central preoccupation. The obvious comparison to Gatsby's library (the archetypal businessman/materialist) is also made, but "even better...the pages of Dickie's books had been not only cut but read, their margins full of sophomoric scribbling in a thousand undergraduate hands" (Russo 155).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Dickie is not only importantly estranged from the people he oversees (as a bureaucrat with little academic background or interest, in charge of professors, who have devoted their careers to academia), he is also importantly alienated from the actual "business" of the university; he is a kind of plagiarist, taking credit for others' work

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<sup>8</sup> This is but one example of what makes this book so clever and I fear that the nature of my project will not be able to do justice to the true genius of this book which lies in its brilliantly conceived, roguish and perceptive comedic moments.

insofar as every attending student has done what Dickie has failed to do in reading and studying "his" books.

As the novel progresses, Hank Devereaux begins to understand that the presence and personality of Dickie Pope is part of a general move being made by the "big boys" to recast the university as a centre for Technical Careers. Humanities departments are not lean and efficient, but job-training centres can be. Thus, the huge hole in the ground on the future site of the new Technical Careers Centre resembles, momentarily for Hank, a mass grave site into which "the administration might put the lot of us...with one deft, efficient stroke (Russo 70). And while this is an obvious exaggeration, the scenarios that emerge in the name of corporate efficiency hold little regard for the livelihoods of the professors. A twenty percent purge of faculty is backed up with the threat of "a thirty percent scenario" (Russo 245). Early retirement plans are withdrawn, it is feared in consideration of "more economical methods" (Russo 319), and department chairs are asked to barter their own security against that of their colleagues by drawing up a list of names or criteria for dismissal. And although this is part of an elevated state of siege, the accepted norm of practice is similarly "deep down mean and petty" (Russo 82). The budgets that are promised, threatened, anticipated and deferred, only to fall through at the last minute (Russo 16), the housing of adjunct faculty "in a huge room with a dozen desks shared by twenty-four" people (Russo 231), the budgetary "danse macabre, a semester-by-semester ritual" that has chairs and deans waiting until the last minute to be told whether or not they have the money to cover "all necessary sections of freshman composition" (Russo 68) characterize the bureaucracy of the university as disgracefully incompetent and basically dishonorable. And the antagonism between the bureaucrats

and the professors is not only implied, it is taken for granted. The result is a man like Jacob Rose, who

is neither respected nor heeded in the university's upper echelons... partly because the liberal arts are not themselves respected, partly because... Jacob has never been very good in the clinches, where most of the interesting administrative blows are struck. He's known to be a nice, decent guy, the result of which is that he's frequently asked to bend over, assume the position. (Russo 82)

Rose's lack of power is seen to be a direct outcropping of his decency as a human being, for power, as an end in itself, defies compromising principles. It therefore becomes antagonistic to scholarly function which depends, in its truest form, on the idealism necessary to the abstract principles of education. As a result, anyone with any measure of power is regarded with deep suspicion. Hank remarks, the "true nature of power in academia... [is that] Those who have any at all have to use the back stairs" (Russo 196). Furthermore, in an environment run by the dictates of power, there is no neutral territory (between delivering blows and bending over) left to occupy. Hank is accused of "giving aid and comfort to the administration" (Russo 239) by his colleagues, and his attempt to remain neutral (and buy into neither the administration's threats nor the union's pressure) is misinterpreted by both sides, because the luxury of neutrality no longer exists in an environment so polarized by antagonistic bids for power. Hank is no longer "*allowed* ironic distance" (italics mine, Russo 170) in an environment that used to be defined by its ability to allow, even encourage, such a stance.



The destructive nature of bureaucratic power is an integral part of Russo's criticism of the current state of the university. When power and business-like efficiency become, increasingly, the motive force behind education then independent thought and free investigation are compromised. When the CIA is able to recruit on campus, then "it's probably appropriate enough for senior faculty to saddle up diaper-clad donkeys for the purpose of mocking sport, the institution of higher learning, and themselves, the ship of dignity having sailed long ago" (Russo 60). When Hank remembers a time, "twenty years ago" when as "a young, bearded radical English professor" (Russo 59) he participated in an environment where the donkeys and an announcement for an Army sponsored M-16 practice would have raised objection, he is remembering a time of idealism, when the university represented a free zone, a place distinct from these things because of the guarded integrity of academia that rose above pandering to government or business in a clear attempt to safeguard its purpose as an institution able to investigate and criticize society from a protected, objective stance.<sup>9</sup> As the corporate model and the bureaucratic principles of control and power infiltrate the university, it is no longer able to maintain objectivity on or space from the society that determines its worth, not apart from governmental or bureaucratic concerns, but as a dependent part of them, as dictated by market principles. Thus, the university is and "should be" considered as subject to ratings mania and accountability models just as car manufacturers are, for, according to Robert Sheppard (Globe and Mail's Western provinces correspondent):

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Said speaks of the importance of guarding this free space in the university, writing: "I have availed myself of the utopian space still provided by the university, which I believe must remain a place where... vital issues are investigated, discussed, reflected on. For it to become a site where social and

If it's OK to rank cars...why not universities? ...Like it or not, we live in a "ratings society" where consumer choice has become the watchword ...Cars, TV shows and politicians are all ranked in one from or another.

Why should universities be any different?" (as qtd. in Emberley 124)

The university loses its ability to comment on society, for, as just another business, the university is ill-managed and not profitable; therefore the Big Three car manufacturers gain more authority in government and have more determining power in our society than do the universities.

As a result, the university becomes subject to the extremes of behaviour and fashion untempered by logic or investigative thought. Relegated by non-academic bureaucrats to the status of a "crippled" institution ("crippled" both in its failure to live up to a corporate model and in its inability to function with respect to a fully functional and widely accepted purpose), the university is now represented by siege without a functioning discourse, persuasion without logic and self-righteousness without principle. Thus, Hank, reading the school newspaper,

scans for unusual content, which in the current climate is any subject other than the unholy trinity of insensitivity, sexism, and bigotry, which the self-righteous, though not always literate, letter writers want their readers to know they're against. As a group they seem to believe that high moral indignation offsets and indeed outweighs all deficiencies of punctuation,

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political issues are actually either imposed or resolved would be to remove the university's function and make it into an adjunct to whatever political party is in power." (xxvi)

spelling, grammar, logic, and style. In support of this notion there's only the entire culture. (Russo 73-4)

The university is unable to maintain the principles of logic, argument or style because that is not what "sells" in the "current climate" or increasingly consumerist culture. A corporate model demands that scholars compete; therefore, the university environment becomes overwhelmed by "high moral indignation" that persists in the absence of discourse because, as Hank observes, it more "effectively smother[s] dissent" (Russo 265). Rather than providing "free space," the university becomes a microcosm, duly exaggerated and extreme, of the culture's intolerance for ideas that are deemed "*politically incorrect*". Similarly, Christopher Lucas notes that the campus controversy over political correctness is in fact a concern for "free speech and equity on campus" (217). This is the substance of Hank's observation when he takes note of the "Animal rights thugs guarding the pond, sexual harassment lunches, the detoxing of the Modern Languages," and thinks to himself, in the words of the famous Buffalo Springfield song "Something's happening here. What it is ain't exactly clear" (Russo 177). The song, importantly, is a bid for the awareness that people's fundamental rights are being trampled in an increasingly hostile and politicized environment in which "Nobody's right if everybody's wrong."

The increasingly political and overly politicized nature of all argument on campus, while it may be encouraged by conceptions of the university that foreground competition as an integral part of the corporate-university, operates at the expense of any more abstract ideals. But professors, rather than suffering from this imposed politicization, have taken it up in interest of causes and theories that further divide the university

community and promote self-interest at the price of communal sensibility. Thus, Hank observes that

Students like Blair have learned from their professors that persuasion--reasoned argument--no longer holds a favored position in university life. If their professors--feminists, Marxists, historicists, assorted other theorists--belong to suspicious, gated intellectual communities that are less interested in talking to each other than in staking out territory and furthering agendas, then why learn to debate?... Anyone who observed [academics in debate] would conclude the purpose of all academic discussion was to provide the grounds for becoming further entrenched in our original positions. (Russo 201)

Under siege, academic discourse breaks down, for, as competition becomes the motive force for scholarship and any unifying principles or communal feelings are damaged by the mood of hostility and suspicion created by bureaucratic siege, academics have no way or means to relate to each other as fellows. In the current climate, "academics have nothing to share" (Herron 49). Thus, the humanities who are feeling most of the heat are reacting in the most volatile ways. The atmosphere in "French, Spanish, German, Italian and Classics" which now "comprise a single department" is "Silly, small, mean-spirited, lame... Same as English" (Russo 61) and the second "most embattled program chair on campus" is Bodie Pie of Women's Studies (Russo 167), a department created as an extension of the political success of feminism and that, in its formation, manifests a "gated intellectual community" (Russo 201). Thus, as the threat to the tenured ranks in the English department intensifies, Hank sees his colleagues all "abuzz", observing

They remind me of the wasps...after Russell doused their hive with Raid.

With the whole wide world to travel in, they persist in circling the hive.

Agitated, they seek each other's company and reassurance. They try every conceivable configuration. (Russo 285)

The academics, under calculated attack, are symbolically rendered homeless with no point of contact and no security, and their consequent actions must be contextualized by their agitation. Their points of contact and moments of reassurance, in the absence of purpose and any real sense of community, come in their forged alliances *against* any perceivable enemy who conceivably may be to blame for the current state of chaos. The result is random stinging, such that the English department "has fifteen grievances pending, against [Hank], the dean, the campus executive officer...more than all other faculty grievances put together" (Russo 112).

Indeed, Russo is far from depicting academics as a saintly, cowering bunch beset by a threatening bureaucracy. For the political power plays that characterize Dickie Pope and the administration in the novel are to a large degree replicated by the members of Hank's English Department. Early in the novel, Hank introduces the reader to the "sad, academic truth" (Russo 4) that June and Teddy are hanging onto their marriage for the political edge it gives them in the department. In what Chambliss termed "near-classic displays of psychological displacement", the members of Hank's department reveal, in themselves, and enact amongst each other, the outrage and intolerance they feel while under threat by their administration. Thus, the threat embodied by the "list" (the list of names or criteria for dismissal that each chair is asked to create) coincides with the organization of a political coup to oust Hank from his position as chair in what could

easily be characterized as an attempt to deal with the fear and anxiety they feel but are unable to deal with at a higher and more effective level (because they are in fear for their jobs). Thus, they accuse Hank of consorting with the administration and deflect their anger onto him for his betrayal rather than the betrayal handed down to them by the administration through Hank.

This highly politicized environment creates many comical opportunities in Russo's novel, but the substance of his criticism is always clear. Campbell Wheemer or "Orshee," for example, is defined by political allegiances that are characterized as ill-thought and highly performative. The reader is told that

After being hired he had startled his colleagues by announcing at the first department gathering of the year that he had no interest in literature per se. Feminist critical theory and image-oriented culture were his particular academic interests. He taped television sitcoms and introduced them into the curriculum in place of phallocentric, symbol-oriented texts (books). His students were not permitted to write. Their semester projects were to be done with video cameras and handed in on cassette. In department meetings, whenever a masculine pronoun was used, Campbell Wheemer corrected the speaker saying, "Or she." ...weary of this affectation... everyone in the department had come to refer to him as Orshee. (Russo 15)

Orshee is a representative of the current university environment, the "usual" content that defines itself through its impassioned and illiterate rejection of "the unholy trinity of insensitivity, sexism and bigotry" (Russo 73). Orshee rejects books and refuses to teach

his students to either read or write, thus *teaching* his students, by precept and example, to let their "high moral indignation offset[] and indeed outweigh[] all deficiencies of punctuation, spelling, grammar, logic, and style" (Russo 73-4), just as he is identified by his tiresome affectation, "or she". His presence is validated by a competitive environment that fractures the university community into insular sectors that attempt to make themselves new and invaluable in their exclusivity (an exclusivity which is judged according to its "sexiness," not its inherent quality), instead of encouraging them to participate in what could be considered a scholarly discourse. Thus, when Orshee publishes his research on television sitcoms in electronic magazines ("thereby sparing himself the criticism that his essays are not worth the paper they're printed on" (Russo 144)), he defines his presence in the university community by his rejection of everything by which it may be defined (reading, writing, books, journals), without any substantive acceptance of an alternate position or idealism. For, despite what anyone may consider the merits of the sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes*, Russo is clearly attempting to characterize the vacuous and emptily trendy nature of Orshee's research when Orshee calls the sitcom a "seminal show" (Russo 144).

And while Orshee's claim to feminism could hardly be termed a claim to an empty idealism, the paradox of his political allegiance is taken to such a ridiculous extreme, when his position becomes so self-righteously self-abdicating, that it becomes clear he actually longs for the subjugation he pretends to stand against as a feminist. When he recommends that the department not consider male candidates for a new position and he is reminded that it was not the procedure followed when he was hired, he exclaims:

"You *should* have hired a woman"...He seemed on the verge of tears, so deep were his convictions in this matter of his being hired over a qualified woman. "And when I come up for tenure, you should vote against me. If we in the English department don't take a stand against sexism, who will?"

(Russo 19)

Orshee's stance here demonstrates the degree to which his idealism is founded in empty, or at least nonsensical, rhetoric. His suggestion, that male candidates not be considered, is not a stand *against* "sexism" but an insistence *on* sexism. What Orshee is celebrating here is the perceived moral purity of victims. Orshee is taking up the cause of the underdog in order to make some claim to moral superiority and broadcast himself as "politically correct," and therefore "politically" viable:

[what] Orshee was...trying to imply...[was] that gay people were fine with him, as were black people and Asian people and Latino people and Native American people. In fact, Orshee would have preferred to be one of these people himself, politically and morally speaking, had the choice been his. Bad luck. (Russo 19)

Orshee is intent on buying into the cultural capital represented by the marginalized in the current academic climate. In his attempt to reject his potentially implied involvement with the oppressor, as a white male, he attempts to capitalize on oppression by buying himself a chance at martyrdom. His implied belief that he considers it "Bad luck" not to be part of a visible minority is one that intends to capitalize on the accepted moral superiority of victims rather than truly oppose what he should be understanding as their state of oppression. (Thus, Orshee would consider it good luck to count himself among



the "oppressed" as a way to get ahead, thereby communicating the degree to which he fails to understand or appreciate the true nature of oppression.)

The fact that this is a political move on Orshee's part and not a viable moral stance is made clear by his eventual comical retraction of his earlier stated position:

It's not that he fears someone may have taken his admonition seriously.

As he explained to June...his contempt for the pervasive sexism of our culture is so powerful, so profound, that he wouldn't mind being sacrificed to further the case of gender equality. Still, he's afraid that his position may have been misunderstood and possibly misstated. What if, in paraphrase, it sounded like he didn't *want* tenure? What if his deepest convictions were misinterpreted as personal dissatisfaction. (Russo 240)

Orshee wants to make his objection clear and wants his martyrdom to be accepted in the spirit he attempts to deliver it, which is, basically, in its irrelevance. Orshee wants his sacrifice to be rejected, because, as he makes it clear, he does *want* tenure. Therefore, he is attempting to establish his moral superiority with a sacrifice he fully intends *not* to have to carry out. The implications of this are further evidenced in Orshee's attempt to adhere to a strict policy of feminism as if it were a political badge of honour maintained in a hostile environment. The fact that Orshee is continually attempting to advertise "his deepest convictions" in an environment that largely accepts them as self-evident affirms the political expediency of his stance rather than his valor. Indeed, it exemplifies the political expediency which predicates Orshee's every move in the department, a stance that becomes comically difficult whenever his competing political interests clash, as made clear when a member of his department makes a joke at Dickie Pope's expense: "...as an

untenued member of the faculty [Orshee]'s not sure of the wisdom of laughing at a joke made at the expense of the CEO. Of course, *not* laughing could be unwise as well" (Russo 233). Despite his self-advertising campaign, Orshee is not attempting to assert his political convictions, he is, more simply, attempting to remain politically correct, and, as such, he is an example of the new breed of scholars coming into the only, and barely, available space in the university.

And while a person like Orshee may be a consequence of the overly politicized nature of the university environment, it is Hank's father, William Henry Devereaux, Sr., "his life and works" that Hank considers to "embody the spirit of our increasingly demoralized profession" (Russo 382). Hank's father is depicted as

an academic opportunist, always in the vanguard of whatever was trendy and chic in literary criticism. This was the fifties, and for him, New Criticism was already old. In early middle age he was already a full professor with several published books, all of them "hot," the subject of intense debate at English department cocktail parties. (Russo xii)

Hank's father's career is notable in its success and its success is largely contingent on the political expediency that Orshee demonstrates but that WHD Sr. elevates to political savvy. His books are "hot" and much discussed, but in the environment of cocktail parties, that operate much like corporate networking parties, environments where everyone has the chance to advertise their opinions on the fashionable subject discussed in a popular scholarly book "without finding the time to actually read it" (Russo 210). These are environments that value performance over true scholarship; thus, as WHD becomes more successful, his scholarship is drained of its value rather than upheld by it.

Hank states that even in his mother's optimistic view "[his father] used to be a powerful and original thinker, now he just jumps on bandwagons. [While his] own take is that [his] father is simply a careerist" (Russo 92). Voguish achievement and empty rhetoric buys WHD success in political arenas just as kissing babies and blue suits represent political achievement in government, but it makes him ill-suited for success in situations that operate outside the political arena because he becomes unused to the strictures of qualitative statement or reasoned argument. Thus, in the classroom WHD is rendered speechless. In the classroom, "words [become] suddenly devoid of meaning, letters of phonic significance" (Russo 211) and, listening out in the hall to his assistant deliver his lecture, WHD is horrified to discover that "separated from his authoritative personality, his observations--even the ones he was most proud of--seemed not...terribly profound" (Russo 213). WHD is exposed to the degree to which his success, and his authority, is performative rather than substantive. But, what he discovers is that he can transform the classroom into a vehicle strictly for performance: "All he needed to do was not take roll or stare directly at the expectant faces of his students" (Russo 215). In order to perform "successfully," he needs to separate himself from his students, and, importantly, from their expectations, because what WHD discovers is that he can speak and speak movingly and eloquently as long as he does not restrict himself to trying to teach. What he relates to his students instead is consistent with the current climate of the university that secures itself position and ascendancy in rejection of, again, "the unholy trinity of insensitivity, sexism and bigotry" (Russo 73). In his lecture on Dickens, WHD also allows his "moral indignation to offset[] and indeed outweigh[] all deficiencies of [his]...logic and style" (Russo 73-4) and he lays "complete waste" to the author. As Hank observes,

never was intellectual contempt more coolly disguised behind a thin veneer of urbane wit than that afternoon...[until]...Finally, [his students] felt themselves to be in the presence of greatness, as they slammed *Bleak House* shut with contempt. (Russo 213)

In order to save himself, WHD relates to his students his own personal superiority, and shows them how to themselves take comfort in such superiority, at the expense of understanding or at least attempting to communicate with a book long considered a classic. Thus, ironically, WHD is damaging the cause of both the university and his department in his eagerness to promote himself and he ends up communicating to his students that study and literature are useless and should be rejected because "Dickens' hero was no crusader after social justice, and neither was his creator" (Russo 214).

Dickens and David Copperfield fail to conform to the dictates of the unholy trinity and thus become victims to the overly politicized environment of the university which dictates intolerance for political impropriety, an idea that destroys the possibility of free speech and independent inquiry, and is fueled frequently by hostility rather than altruism.

Ultimately, WHD becomes a broken man, paralyzed by regret, but even his regret focuses inappropriately on performative values rather than substantive ones, and thus, continues to miss the point. Hank's father fails to recognize that his most important failure in life was his failure to live up to his responsibility to his family, whom he abandoned in his pursuit of further fame and success. Instead, he focuses on the ultimate failure of his life's "achievements" as they were built on, for example, a flat-out rejection of Dickens's writing that he now recognizes offended "Some power...something...transcendent, really" (Russo 346) in the novels. This is consistent with his sudden

awareness out in the hallway of his own classroom that even the observations of which he is most proud are not very weighty or insightful, but this remains a blow to his ego rather than his values. For, if WHD recognized a failure of responsibility as a teacher or a scholar, rather than simply his reputation as a scholar, a thinker, a reader of literature, it would be safe to assume that he would recognize, at least to some extent, his more important failure as a husband and father. WHD's failure to recognize his more serious, personal faults suggests that he is suffering to the extent that he has been forced to realize he was not the man he thought he was, not because of any perceivable regret for his indifference to his responsibilities. WHD worries that he has been wrong, not that he has wronged his students, as such, he totally forgoes consideration of his more important responsibilities to his wife or his son.

Hank's relationship with his father brings him to the understanding that one of the deepest purposes of intellectual sophistication is to provide distance between us and our most disturbing personal truths and gnawing fears...[my father] still had access to the full range of human emotions, but after a lifetime of sophisticated manipulation they were no longer connected to anything real. They fired randomly, unexpectedly, like the passions of a newborn, urgent but without context or, in my father's case, appropriate context. (Russo 382)

This observation provides the context for the displacement enacted by Hank's colleagues that has them attacking each other in rejection of their circumstances and it also provides an important context for the ending of the novel. After the worst has happened in the novel and everyone in the English department is saved, thanks to the comedically

convenient machinations of nice-guy Jacob Rose, a sort of peace results, and a group of colleagues gather at Tony Coniglia's house and get trapped in a room together. Gathered against a door that opens inward, Hank observes

Clearly, the only solution was for all of us to take one step backward so that the door could be pulled open. By this point a group of plumbers, a group of bricklayers, a group of hookers, a group of chimpanzees would have figured this out. But the room contained, unfortunately, a group of academics, and we couldn't quite believe what had happened to us. (Russo 391)

Perhaps, it is Russo's suggestion here that the academics fail to figure this out because they fail to simply accept their situation. Their brains are firing, but they are no longer connected to anything real and this prevents them from accepting the reality of their predicament. Instead, they are trained to, and become stuck, considering its probability, which causes them, despite evidence, to reject it as a possibility; it is not that they do not understand what has happened to them, it is that they refuse to *believe* it. This occurs much in the same way that serious threats to their livelihoods and the university in general can be rejected by the academics at which they are leveled; they are not happening because it is so evident that they *should not* be happening.<sup>10</sup> Russo's novel ultimately depicts the university environment as one suffering from the hostility it encounters from the corporate agenda inflicted upon it by bureaucrats, indifferent to any sense of the university's proper function, and a reactionary society, that demands a stance

of moral indignation over the intricacies of considered thought. The degree to which this hostility and politicization can be defended against, is the degree to which the academics are able to come together. And this is, ultimately, what is necessary. The in-fighting inside the university must stop, though there may be little left, at this point, but a small room and an unreadable computer printout promising "a list of options" should we "break the code" (Russo 390). Indeed, symbolically, Russo's final image functions as a, perhaps bemused, but portentous warning that is consistently reiterated in the non-fiction writing on the university. Soaked, we have to shake ourselves off now and still find the sense to turn the fire-hoses on the burning building.

The university environment as Ishmael Reed depicts it in *Japanese by Spring* is similarly, symbolically, burning, rife as it is with political posturing and hostile bids for power. But Reed's position is that the university has always been hopelessly politicized, a fact that is only becoming exaggerated in times of political turmoil and economic restraint. Reed's depiction of the university environment holds no vision of an ideal past, but rather focuses on a, potentially, more enlightened future. The novel centers on Chappie Puttbutt, a professor working in the "Humanity" department at Jack London College of Oakland. Reed's coy use of the term "humanity" for humanities serves to emphasize the irony of such an appellation in a department that uses human strife for political advantage. And the invocation of Jack London is meant to attest to the hypocrisy of a society that privileges such a man (the narrator dubs him "the apostle of

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<sup>10</sup> Though it may only be coincidental, it is nonetheless interesting that the academics here find themselves stuck in a room too small to move, considering Said's discussion of the university as a "utopian space" (xxvi).

Anglo-Saxon superiority" (Reed 9)), as a namesake for a university, a place ostensibly for free expression and forward thinking.

Puttbutt, a black scholar who works simultaneously in the African American Studies and English departments, wants to gain political advantage and thereby secure himself tenure. To do so, he allies himself with whomever he believes has the power advantage, willfully doing anything, without moral or ideological restraint, to win their favour. The narrator explains

Puttbutt was a member of the growing anti-affirmative action industry. A black pathology merchant. Throw together a three-hundred page book with graphs and articles about illegitimacy, welfare dependency, single-family households, drugs and violence; paint the inner cities as the circles of hell in the American paradise...and you could write your way to the top of the best-sellers list...It was the biggest literary hustle going and Puttbutt decided that he was going to get his...All of these speeches, op-eds and lectures, he felt, would get him where he wanted to be. Would get him tenure. (Reed 10)

Puttbutt is aware that he is working in a system that privileges not research or groundbreaking scholarship but power. He is, by virtue of the colour of his skin, outside the circumference of this power base, so he will gain power by reinforcing the powers that be, telling them what they want to hear. For in a system under siege, power is the only advantage. Thus, Puttbutt doesn't "worry about [his black colleagues]. They had little power and what little they had was frittered away through back biting and vicious feuds among themselves" (Reed 16). His concern is only to gain favour with his white



colleagues, as the representatives of power in a university named for a racist, and, more directly, as those capable of rewarding him with job security.

Puttbutt's total willingness to sell out, however, does not make his life easy in the current university environment, but complicates it almost hopelessly, as the locus of its power is so hopelessly conflicted. Because its members are fighting all-out battles on the issues of race and gender, are divided by theoretical allegiance, and, without a secure ideology, are ultimately defenseless to the upheaval of ever-shifting trends, the university becomes a place that encourages and rewards senseless and pragmatic allegiances instead of considered thought. Thus, the Department of African-American Studies "ma[kes] it clear to [Puttbutt] that they want[] a 'club member,' which [is] the code phrase for those of similar ideology, [but] the ideology kept shifting" (Reed 10). Maintaining allegiance, in such an environment, results in Puttbutt's hapless and disordered career that requires an absurdly unquestioning submission:

When the Black Power thing was in, Puttbutt was into that. When the backlash on Black Power settled in, with its code words like reverse discrimination, he joined that. He'd been a feminist when they were in power. But now they were on the decline, unable to expand beyond their middle-class constituency and so for now he was a neoconservative, but since a split had developed among the financial backers of the neoconservative...that might be over too. (Reed 49)

Though Puttbutt, as ridiculous as he is, is perhaps an exaggerated figure, Reed makes it clear that he can be considered representative in a community that privileges political prowess and confers power, in the form of tenure, so carefully and conveniently,

such that the difference that isolates Puttbutt at Jack London College is not in an overabundance of political expediency, but, much more simply, in the degree of power he holds. Puttbutt's lack of power determines the nature of his fight as he must struggle to gain more, among others who, though equally foolish and empty, are motivated by their desire to maintain the power they already hold. For example, when the Miltonians, who, at Jack London College, "[have] the real power," are challenged by a "gender-whipped" male feminist, Dr. Milch, in his assertion that Milton was a possible batterer, "his moves were blocked and he almost lost his chairpersonship" (Reed 23). The Miltonians operate with the arrogance and intolerance that their power allows, but they are motivated by the same political biases and self-serving rules of conduct that Puttbutt exemplifies. So, when Puttbutt loses his bid for tenure because the Miltonians are "in a war with the deconstructionists, the feminists, and the New Historicists..." (Reed 78) and need to hire another Miltonian to fill out their ranks, it strikes the reader as a sort of ironic inevitability that Puttbutt be denied power in the same spirit he sought to gain it. Reed, thereby, makes it clear that the university, operating without any stabilizing principles of merit or intellect, takes on the chaos of the battleground in which participants are too concerned with the struggle for survival to allow for the challenges of thought.

Similarly, the feminists in the novel abuse their waning power and are hypocritically self-righteous in their attempts to guard it. Reed demonstrates the extent to which the desire for power ultimately causes even the most staunchly defended ideologies to become warped and emptied of value in a chaotic environment. Arguably reserved for

his most virulent and direct<sup>11</sup> criticism, the feminists in the novel have lost all sense of the ideology behind their school of thought as they continue to fight, not for their theoretical "cause," but for their personal causes. As a result, Reed makes it clear that feminism, like other theoretical positions in the university, depends on and demands blind allegiance. Puttbutt pleases the reigning feminists at Jack London College by making a studied confession of guilt designed to win himself favour by encouraging their own sense of influence. He confesses obsequiously

Sometimes I wonder how I got along without feminist theory. All of those years of male chauvinist activity. Of exploiting women's bodies.

Seducing them. Sometimes I don't even get to sleep until 3 a.m. I feel so guilty. I guess you might call me a recovering misogynist. (Reed 59)

This confession pleases the head of the Women's Studies department, and she declares happily upon hearing it "I wish that there were more men like you" (Reed 59). The inference here is that a "recovering misogynist" is, in fact, the best thing for the Women's

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<sup>11</sup> Literally "direct," as Reed writes himself, "Ishmael Reed," into the narrative to voice some of his most serious criticisms of the current state of feminism. This strategy can be, at the very least, uncomfortable for the reader, as it causes the characters and scenarios in the novel to take on a viability that seems out of place in what might otherwise function as a comic novel. In the presence of "Ishmael Reed," it is perhaps the author's desire to demonstrate the extent to which his fictional university is consistent with the realm of historical fact (in which the novel's "Ishmael Reed" travels). Leon Lewis determines that the appearance of "Reed" alters the tone of the book "toward a more reflective consideration of the issues" (204). However, the result, at least potentially, also works in the opposite direction, in that Reed's fictional universe can seem an unfair and uncontextualized exaggeration once he attempts to posit it as more true to fact. That is, as a reader, I found I was willing to allow for the excesses of comedy to make their point; I could appreciate Puttbutt *as a character*. But I found I was not quite as willing to believe in the legitimacy of Puttbutt as a representation of the university community once he gained the greater status implied by his meeting and talking with "Ishmael Reed." As a character, Puttbutt can serve to point out the dangerous ends of political expediency in his exaggeratedly vacuous stance. With the implication that he is something more closely representing a man, I found I wanted to point out that he was, after all, made of straw --that so simple a character with such uncomplicated motivations was easier to knock down than he was to get to stand. Despite these misgivings about certain aspects of Reed's approach, however, the novel does function as an interesting critique of the university and does speak to concerns reflected in much of the other writing on the university whether fictional or not.

Studies department, better even than simply a male feminist, because it stresses the importance of the department's existence as it serves to enlighten and reform exactly those who, in its conception, it is targeting. Reed makes it clear with the head's self-righteous response that, with the existence of departments like the Women's Studies department, and the ascendancy of feminist thought, feminists have become powerful, and this power has gone to their heads. The department head responds gleefully to Puttbutt's submissive stance as it flatters her and acknowledges her power over him, something that should be antithetical to the cause of equality. This demonstrates that it is her aim to instill in others, not the sense of an all-embracing egalitarianism, but her moral superiority. Thus, it is an important part of her praise of Puttbutt that she asserts "You're a role model for your brothers who often behave like savages" (Reed 59), because the savage behaviour of men becomes, by virtue of her ideology, the source of her power. Thus, the issue, and target, is once again increased power, while the fight for equal rights is simply the means toward it.<sup>12</sup>

Reed stresses this in his exploration of the anti-male sentiment springing up in militant feminism. In a long passage, "Ishmael Reed" documents feminist publications that determine "male ejaculation [as an] act of war" (Reed 25) and reviews the positions of real-life feminists that are so anti-male that "the worst name that Robin Morgan could think of to call a feminist with whom she had a disagreement was 'heterosexual'" (Reed 25). The movement into anti-male propaganda by some feminists, Reed suggests, signals

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<sup>12</sup> Reed has a long standing grievance against feminists and they have appeared as the explicit target of many of his novels, including *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), in which "feminism is important...as a force that maintains the gross generalizations out of crude self-interest. It is a particularly destructive form of racism

a desire for a heightened sense of power and control. Equality becomes an insufficient goal, because it does not grant them adequate power. This is demonstrated when, at a feminist conference, "a woman who said that she liked men was booed...[and] black women walked out in protest at being excluded from panels" (Reed 25). Feminism, originally a fight for equality and a movement that sought to give women a voice, now caters, not to all women, but to the women in control. Thus, rather than rejecting the exclusionary principles of "the white male patriarch who presides over the capitalistic system that oppresses us all" (Reed 59), the feminists create an ironically parallel system to the patriarchal system. Accordingly, when the Japanese take over Jack London College, the feminists are grouped together with their traditional enemies because "...the way we see it, there's no significant difference between your aims and those of your patriarchal allies. You just wanted in" (Reed 105).

The degree to which feminism promotes people that consciously *use* its rhetoric to gain advantage is the degree to which it is being emptied of meaning and robbed of its original significance. In the novel, April Jokujoku is being courted by the Women Studies department as a valuable appointment, and one that will ultimately replace Puttbutt, because she plays the game of feminism "successfully", that is, to gain power. April is "always jumping on people about their 'homophobia.' Their 'sexism.' Their 'racism.'" Puttbutt admits: "She [is] a good writer, but the publicity image distract[s] from the verse" (Reed 27). The publicity image is what makes April an attractive appointment, but the extent to which she stridently advertises her allegiance to causes is,

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in that its prejudices are not only allowed but exalted by liberal consciousness...such racism...lies at the heart of the American society's drive to 'go for it'...to 'succeed'" (Punday 174).

as it is with Orshee, suspect, insofar as it suggests that she is assuming the causes not for the values they represent but for their marketability. This suggestion is cultivated by Puttbutt's observation that the publicity image overwhelms any value in her writing for it insinuates that image has become more important than intellectual or creative accomplishment to April because, notably, it is a more dependable marker of success. This idea is upheld by the Women's Studies department as they eagerly set out to fulfill all of April's ridiculous demands, proving that they obviously privilege the skewed values she represents:

She wanted computer equipment, two secretaries, a bodyguard and a house in the mountains, though her whole pitch was about the oppression of the underclass females in the ghettos. While the underclass women were getting their subsistence budgets cut by white male politicians, journalists, and think-tank black pathology gangsters, she, being a talented tenth aristocrat, blamed the problems of her and her "diva" buddies on white women and black men. She was one of the most successful cause pimps in the business. Ecology. Animal rights. You name it, and if there were speaking fees to it or other cash to be made, there she was whining about the fate of the poor white mink. She'd hypnotized these white women. Had them eating out of her hand. Had a column in some "progressive" magazine that was full of shifty-eyed and sleight-of-hand rhetoric. (Reed 33)

April, and the feminists that support her, are playing the game of feminism to great personal advantage, and the game misses or ignores the very values and people it is said

to support and represent. Oppression to academic feminists becomes a badge of honour and it is used to excuse their self-interested and self-righteous behaviour while it offends the cause and needs of the genuinely oppressed. Thus, April bowls everybody over with her "triple [oppression pitch]: woman, lesbian, and black" (Reed 34) and fails to identify or speak to the needs of the women she thereby claims to represent. Accordingly, another, and real-life, "famous black feminist" claims to be "more interested in representations than reality" (Reed 82), causing the narrator to comment on the irony that "While thousands of black families [are] living out on the streets, the black intelligentsia...[are] obsessed with the question of identity" (Reed 82). In Reed's view, the university community serves itself, promotes itself, by pilfering from important causes to lend themselves importance. So, April, and others like her, are "cause pimp[s]," they write articles that are "shifty-eyed" and use "sleight-of-hand rhetoric" (Reed 33). This is because their concern and the success of their careers are not determined by their take on external realities but their adherence and deference to the overly politicized internal structures of power at the university.<sup>13</sup>

However caustic and cynical Reed becomes in his criticism of different members of the university community, he nonetheless makes it clear that this obsession with self-empowerment is rooted in the corporate agenda imposed upon the university by a government and corporate elite that devalues education and fails to appreciate or understand the merit of the humanities. The corporate agenda is responsible for creating

<sup>13</sup> As such, Darryl Dickson-Carr asserts "The case of the Women's Studies department further illustrates the text's overarching metaphor of power exchange. In other words, what happens when an individual or group previously excluded from the social mainstream suddenly gains access to power? Almost invariably, that power is squandered on frivolous ideologies and materials while the newly empowered try to hold onto

an environment that operates in the absence of ideological standards or goals and entrenches, in their stead, principles of power. The power mandate of the university becomes clear when it is known that "The president was...recruited in hopes that he could sell the university as well as he could sell stocks. But there were complaints about his lavish dining habits, his unpaid bills, and his expense accounts" (Reed 40). Like Dickie Pope, the president comes from the corporate world and exists inside the university as a CEO, rather than the head of a non-profit institution. His position in the university is valuable to him as it grants him the marks of privilege and wealth that an expense account affords, although he is unfamiliar with and intolerant of anyone who tries, or pretends to try, to operate outside this corporate system. The narrator announces that "...the president thought the people in the Humanity were a bunch of soft hands. He saw the world in terms of losers and gainers. Humanity people were losers" (Reed 42). The president, who sees the world only in terms of success or failure, in terms of degrees of power, becomes some kind of nightmarish extreme of self-serving intolerance and self-righteousness. His power bias results in frank racism, sexism and homophobia and gravitates toward a macho confrontational attitude that is out of step with the professed "causes" demonstrated by some of the members of the university, although quite reconcilable in their practical applications. That is, the result of an overwhelming power bias is to reduce all causes to ones that thrive on confrontation and conquest. This is the potent danger of a figure like the president, who Reed, rather plainly, names President Bright Stool, a name that links his scatological nature to his duplicitous behaviour (so

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what little power they have or gaining more power than enacting the social changes that engendered the original push for power" (225).



that, crudely, he is both a shit and a fink): making him a man that represents both the lowest order and an ultimate betrayal to the principles of considered thought that the university is supposed to uphold.

Reed makes it clear that without an ideological basis, the university will not be allowed to function as a place that challenges ignorance, most notably represented by the blatant racism of several characters in the novel. When power and money become the central concerns of the university, it will ultimately be unable to function as anything other than a corporate enterprise. In the novel, when a young neo-Nazi, Bass Jr., is suspended for racist activities, his father, Bass Sr., a major corporate backer of the university withdraws his financial support and encourages his friends to do the same, thereby threatening the continued existence of the university. And, as it is stated, "No relief could be expected from the state, either. They owned the governor, whose name in Armenian meant 'the servant' (the servant to corporate interests). The governor's every speech indicated that he hated education" (Reed 76). Corporate interest is self-serving and has no connection to the ideological purposes of education or the institution of the university; thus, it will have no qualms about molding the institute into a service industry for its own needs and thereby utterly offending the university's traditional place in the society as a free zone. If the university is to operate as a business, power is all that determines authority. So, when the university is taken over by a Japanese group with a one hundred million dollar endowment, Bass Sr., who pulled out of the university in defense of his son, now tries to win favour with this new powerful boss, admitting "Hell, I have to go with the flow in order to remain in business" (Reed 102). But "going with the flow" should be antithetical to the university as it is antithetical to the principles that

guide education and encourage thought. Ideally, the university should investigate, not follow, the flow. But as long as those in control of the university, those who support its continued existence in society, are guided by this notion, the university will not be able to function as an independent institution. Thus, in the novel, the Japanese takeover is meant to function as a *parallel* to the dictatorial control of corporations in the university. When the Japanese businessmen assume control, they use the same power bias to determine the function and identity of the university, but instead of operating under the biases of Western culture, they are instituting the traditions and assuming the ascendancy of Eastern, Japanese culture. Thus, an IQ-like test asks "simple" questions like "Who was the first novelist and name her book? Name the monk who introduced Zen Buddhism into Japan? What was the former name for Tokyo?..." (Reed 143). The function of their money and their power allows the Japanese backers of the university to insist that the person who is able to answer these questions demonstrates, not a certain cultural background, but what is now determined to be education, or even intelligence, under their newly revised definitions. Because power dictates the definition of education, it therefore dictates the identity and function of the university.

Puttbutt quickly assumes a position as "second in command," under this new regime, because he realizes that "His parents were right. Life [is] war..." (Reed 110). Under President Stool's administration, Puttbutt tried to do whatever he could to gain favour with those in power, but now, after failing to gain their favour by failing to get tenure, he will ally himself with a force stronger than them, the Japanese. This is a good tactical move for Chappie who has demonstrated the extent to which he is motivated only by self-empowerment. Driven by his desire for revenge, Puttbutt helps the Japanese

dismantle the once-reigning powers in the university. With new and different biases, the new university president decides to "apply the empirical razor to all of these so-called theories" (Reed 91) that uphold Western culture. And, as a result, they "...close down the Department of Humanity and move it into Ethnic Studies" (Reed 90) using the familiar rhetoric of finance to instill into the members of the university a new sense of who is in power, as well as their relative place in the new power structure. As the man in power, Dr. Yamato decrees:

You have African Studies, Chicano Studies, Asian-American Studies, Native-American Studies and African-American Studies. We will have a new department, European Studies, with the same size budget and faculty as the rest. My backers would like to eliminate all of these courses which allow for so much foolishness, but they also want to show to the faculty and students how conciliatory we are. We will allow for these frills.

(Reed 90)

Dr. Yamato's backers determine the structure of the university according to their beliefs and biases, just as, in the past, President Stool operated in service of his corporate backers.

Under this new regime, Puttbutt begins to enjoy turning his newfound power against those who in the recent past enjoyed power over him. He sets out to dismantle all the theories, and theorists, to which he used to play lip service, using their own theories to attack them, in the same way that they were used against him. He fires the evocatively named Himmlar Poop on the authority of a newly published article that states brain size shrinks as a person ages, saying

You maintain that blacks have a smaller brain size than whites, so elderly whites such as you have smaller brains than young blacks or whites. One could say that young blacks are brighter than you using your own theory, right? It's on account of your own theory that you're out of a job. (Reed 118)

Puttbutt outlines this to his colleague, admitting, "[he] was having so much fun that he couldn't stand it" (Reed 118). Then, feeling equally gleeful, he

[sends] a letter to the campus deconstructionists, informing them of their termination. The letters said you're fired. Those who believed that the words "you're fired" meant exactly that could finish the semester. Those who felt that the words only referred to themselves would have to leave immediately.<sup>14</sup> (Reed 132)

Puttbutt's own erratic theoretical history already demonstrated the extent to which he felt that theory operated most importantly, not as a new mode of thinking or apprehending the world, but as a vehicle for self-serving attempts to gain and assert power. This contextualizes the pleasure he takes in these prankish power plays in which he finally gets to be the one making the demand for "a 'club member'" (Reed 10) while delightedly shifting the ideologies out of his colleagues' grasp. This said, after first seeing "Dr. Yamato as a liberating force...[Puttbutt] gradually comes to realize that his new master is the same as his old one..." (McGee 136). For, although Dr. Yamato and his Japanese

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<sup>14</sup> I cannot resist considering this joke the other way around. That is, rather than simply trying to prove the deconstructionists' theories of language wrong, it may have been funnier to prove that they themselves function in day-to-day life despite them. And thus, the deconstructionists who *did* believe that the words

backers may reverse the biases that beleaguer the university, in spirit they remain the same. This functions like any good comic reversal, and exposes, for the reader, and several of the characters, offensive conduct that may seem simply routine in its more familiar guise. Dr. Yamato's efforts to change the name "Jack London College" to "Hideki Tojo No University," after the Prime Minister of Japan during World War II who was hanged for war crimes, and rename the Student Union "Isoroku Yamamoto Hall" after "the mastermind behind the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor" (Reed 137) illustrates not just cultural contingency but the degree to which power picks its own champions. Choosing men "the Americans view as war criminals" (Reed 137), Dr. Yamato's actions mimic the treason Reed identifies earlier in the novel in the figure of Jack London presiding over an institution for learning, and violates the Western traditional conception of history that determines the nature of these men as evil for their relationship to the United States. But, as Dr. Yamato insists, these men are only assumed evil if one assumes the primacy of the States. As Dr. Yamato's move into power proves, a cultural bias can be bought, and, thus, it can be changed. For the threat and determining power Dr. Yamato wields is decided on the same basis as that of any other business or government backer touting a new corporate agenda: money. Hence, he can confidently declare that he has shut down any resistance to his changes because

We've raised the salaries of the faculty and they've ended their protests.

Oh, of course they were complaining about what they call the Nihon-chu-o

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"you're fired" meant exactly that" would be fired immediately for clearly not living by the tenets they profited from by espousing.

curricula, but we all knew that they had car payments. Obligations. I know they don't want to work at the burger counters. (Reed 137)

Reed makes it clear that the university has become a slave to the corporate agenda that has the power and controls the resources that determine the livelihoods of those inside the university. Without any other defining purpose for the university, there is nothing preventing the university from becoming yet another business that buys its employees' servitude rather than having any reason to imagine it benefits from their participation.

The takeover of Jack London College shows, in extreme, the dictates of power and the influence that corporate managerialistic controls have over the function and identity of the university. The Japanese, in a financial takeover, and by dictatorial power, demonstrate to the deconstructionists, the Miltonians, the feminists and others, that the desire to protect their power base in the university is consistent with that which eventually robs them of authority under the reign of Dr. Yamato. It reveals to them the influence of the competition for power, and its dangerous implications and responsibility in the function of their own biases. It demonstrates how they have become entrenched in issues of power and, *as a result*, lost their will to think or learn, to be challenged, and therefore to be educated or to educate. In the end, Dr. Crabtree, a Miltonian who Puttbutt sends off to learn the West African Yoruba language, can assert

I agree that Dr. Yamato's two-month reign of terror should be ended but I am of the opinion that we should be grateful to him. He was just giving us a dose of our own medicine... For years we've been saying that our tradition and our standards were universal, but Dr. Yamato has taught us that two can play that game... It was my stupid arrogance, my devotion to

these standards that we're always talking about that almost prevented me from embarking on this wonderful adventure. Learning this new language...and [discovering] a new world. (Reed 154-5)

Reed emphasizes the extent to which the university's problems are dictated by its adherence to a power mandate, and how that obsession with power creates and supports rapacious self-promoters, and ultimately makes the institution vulnerable to the vagaries of corporate enterprise.<sup>15</sup> Reed makes it clear that the university fails to the extent that it promotes people like the Miltonians, the feminists, April Jokujoku, President Stool, Bass Junior and Senior, and Dr. Yamato, and will succeed only to the extent that it adheres to its most basic principle: education. Dr. Crabtree's remarkable reversal, his evolution from a staunch Miltonian who fiercely rejects the possibility of equal or even adequate merit in other traditions<sup>16</sup> to an enlightened multi-culturalist, is accomplished as he is awakened to the richness and depth of a culture he, in his ignorance, was willing to dismiss. Thus, the narrator states "The English Only people and the monoculturalists were like the religious fanatics who didn't believe in blood transfusions" (Reed 51). The university's health is threatened by its adherence to a tradition that services power and resists the opening up into new realms of thought, such that the hope for the future of the university resides in the final image of "a beautiful black butterfly with yellow spots" (Reed 225) that collides with "Ishmael Reed's" chin. The butterfly represents a kind of

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<sup>15</sup> In this spirit, Reed has called the university, "just a front for things like the neutron bomb" (Northouse 51).

<sup>16</sup> It is a published comment of Crabtree's that inspires Puttbutt to send him away to learn Yoruba. And as Leon Lewis points out, Crabtree's comment "if Yoruba would produce a Turgenev [I] would be glad to read him"--[is] a variant of Saul Bellow's similar comment on a Swahili Tolstoy" (206fn). Puttbutt's action results in Crabtree's transformation and subsequent admission: "Have they produced a Tolstoy? They have produced Tolstoys" (Reed 155).

multicultural utopic vision. It appears as "an attractive hybrid supporting [Reed's] belief that the richness of human experience depends on a blending of attributes and that no one individual has the best or only approach to anything" (Lewis 206). Thus, it attests to a perfect beauty in the coming together of different traditions that can ultimately inform and comment upon another, but take their worth through their intrinsic, not their transitive value. That is, nobody worries about how fast a butterfly can go; they wonder at what a butterfly is. Like Dr. Crabtree's transformation, the butterfly's value exists in and of itself.

Both Reed and Russo represent the bureaucrats in their novels as operating in a manner antithetical to the ultimate nature and function of the university and represent their increased power as a threat to the purposes of education and the world of ideas. This threat is internalized by the faculty who further divide themselves into warring factions in a response to their embattled environment, and in attempts to save themselves in a climate that privileges the politically aggressive behaviour of corporate lackeys in favour of the composed consideration of intellectuals. The cautionary tone of these novels, alternately comic and critical, speaks to the mood of crisis that prevails in writing on the state of the university both fictional and non-fictional, and attempts to warn members of the university community of the folly of their present positions.



### Chapter Three -- Uncertainty and Truth

Certainly no discussion of the state of the contemporary university can take place without giving adequate attention to the ascendancy of literary theory in the last few decades. In academia today, literary theory inhabits an indisputably central space, influencing much, if not all, of the work currently done in the humanities. This gives reason for J. Hillis Miller to triumphantly declare: "Even the most conservative scholars have been forced to take account of theory by the immense proliferation of activities associated with it" (286). But, even though its influence and ascendancy cannot be contested, or fairly denied, almost every other aspect of theory's proper nature and its larger relevance in the current university environment is hotly debated.<sup>1</sup>

In much of the non-fiction written on the state of the university, critics attempt to ascertain the extent of theory's involvement in the university's current state of crisis. But, since theory has become so pervasive in the humanities, it is not possible for anyone who could be fairly deemed an insider in the university to remain detached from or objective about theory, for, invariably, s/he has declared either their allegiance for, or maintained some staunch resistance against, some combination of its tenets. So, if it is the case, as Michael Bérubé admits, that "The discipline's critics are not entirely wrong to suggest that in the present regime, one's theoretical allegiances can determine one's critical

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<sup>1</sup> This extends even to the meaning of the blanket term "theory," which in these novels and in this chapter is used to refer to what Bradbury terms "Structuralist-Deconstructive" thought. This defines "theory" as the various popular literary theories since Structuralism to the present and often conflates two of the most notable figures (and theories) of Foucault and Derrida, despite recorded differences. These two are lumped together both by the critics of deconstruction and in the novels largely, I believe, because "Derrida's epistemology is fundamentally like Foucault's inasmuch as he believes that truth is purely the product of contextual historical, institutional, or economic forces" (Argyros 82).

conclusions (*Employment* 11), it becomes difficult to take anyone's critical conclusions about theory without--much--salt.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of this debate, theory's detractors have come to occupy as important a place as theory's proponents in the academic scene, for one cannot come to any real understanding of theory's place in the university without being aware of the challenges levelled against it.<sup>3</sup> Criticism of literary theory figures rather largely in many current university novels (as we have seen at some level in the novels already discussed) and features as the central concern in both Malcolm Bradbury's *Mensonge*, and Robert Grudin's *Book*. Perhaps because of the pronounced "Death of the Author," university novelists seem, for the most part, to take umbrage at the loss of their "being[,] preceding or exceeding the writing," (Barthes 145), and in being reduced to the status of "scriptor," who produces simply "a tissue of quotations" (Barthes 146). As a result, the university novel, almost uniformly, depicts theory negatively,<sup>4</sup> contesting its value to the university and, more pointedly, to anyone sincerely interested in (let alone professing any affection for) literature.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, this qualification includes me and this chapter as it does the authors of the novels to be discussed herein; Malcolm Bradbury and Robert Grudin have both worked in the university.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, it must made be very clear that this chapter is *not* an attempt to examine post-structuralist or deconstructive theory, or even "theory" more generally, but the *criticism* of that theory, in order to verify a connection between the criticism put forward by those inside the academy and the criticism propounded in the novels by the novelists.

<sup>4</sup> I have been able to find one notable exception in the university novels written in the last ten to fifteen years, and that is a novella written by James Hynes called *Casting the Runes* (and published in a collection of three novellas under the title *Publish and Perish*.) In Hynes' novella, theory is connected to the youth, energy and forward-thinking nature of a new batch of scholars coming into the system while resistance to theory is connected to the old Guard who resent the intrusion and the eroding effect theory has had on their one-time supremacy. However, while this is an interesting reversal, and one consistent with many of the defenses of literary theory, *Casting the Runes* does not engage with the university as a subject with nearly the same depth or breadth as the other books I discuss in this project (nor does it, in my opinion, demonstrate the same level of quality or sophistication), and as such, I cannot fairly place it as a direct counterpoint to the novels in this chapter. Furthermore, because of the uniqueness of its position on the

The positions of Bradbury and Grudin, though similarly critical, take place on two separate levels. In this chapter, I will deal with each book separately, placing each one individually inside the context of the non-fiction written on the university. Both books depict theory at rather monstrous extremes, whether the issue be the internalized conflict of Henri Mensonge or the interpersonal conflict that threatens Adam Snell's career, and life, but these extremes nonetheless cast a critical eye on the space that theory occupies in current scholarship, and thus they engage much of the debate that occurs *inside* the university's walls.

One of the principal criticisms of deconstructive criticism that operates as the base for Bradbury's *Mensonge* is what is considered its basic improbability as it posits a world of arbitrary signification, "forever without closure" (Kristeva 128), in a world that depends regularly (and largely successfully) on the practical referentiality of language. As Woodring phrases it: "Deconstruction begins in a willful exaggeration of the difficulties of communicating thoughts and feelings in a natural...language" (68). This "exaggeration" results in what many critics feel is a split between what deconstructive theory affirms about the nature of language and what occurs "in the human paradigm of language-in-use" (Abrams "What" 200), such that "not only are the theory world of Derrida [and] Foucault... unrecognizable in light of our daily interpretive practices and human encounters, but they are uninhabitable for long, even by the theorists themselves" (Eddins 3). This uninhabitability provides the ground work for Bradbury's comic treatment of the apparent "logical" ends of deconstruction. As Kim Worthington

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merit of critical theory, it is not really representative of a common theme in the university novel, and thus, falls outside of the scope of this project and chapter.

declares, "the lived experience of our lives as human beings forces us to reconsider the conclusions toward which such theorizing points" (12), so Bradbury determines that deconstructive principle is unrealistic and inconsistent with the practical truths employed successfully in real life. Bradbury's criticism is reflected then in the degree to which theory is, nonetheless, and despite evidence, defended in academia, and his novel attempts to prove (as the scholars critical of deconstruction similarly argue) the extent to which theory has become an end in itself. M.H. Abrams, for example, discusses the phenomenon in which

...a theoretical position that may have value as an adventure in vision, or as a speculative instrument for discovery, suffers a hardening of the categories and becomes a Grand Theory. Or to put the matter in a different figure: a tentative working hypothesis becomes a tyrannical ruling hypothesis whose consequences are projected as the way things really are, because by logical necessity they must be so. In such extreme instances the result is that the human world in which people deploy language in their diverse purposes, for good and for ill, is displaced by a theory world in which people are not agents but agencies, not users of language but used by language, not effectors but themselves only effects. ("What" 29-30)

Abrams suggests that the theory world overwhelms the human world to the extent that it refuses to be delineated or denied by the hazards of practical consideration or application, and thus theory gains an ascendancy it cannot deserve, nor reasonably maintain.

It is perhaps ironic that second to this main accusation leveled at theorists is a perceived, and rampant, careerism (a motive made insidious by its unadorned practicality). If it becomes clear that "deconstruction is proffered as a tactic to uncover, redescribe, and put to question, but without either the intention or the possibility of destroying or supplanting, the procedures of our ordinary linguistic practices" (Abrams "What" 28), it seems reasonable to suggest that deconstruction *is*, in fact, "play" and is operating only for and because of itself. Hence, (it is deduced) it cannot be simply a coincidence that "Structuralism and deconstruction are criticism-oriented theories. Philosophically difficult, abstract and endlessly complex, they are the works of experts and require explanation by experts" (Kernan *Death* 82). The articulation of deconstruction's tenets and its practice have been, undeniably, career-making, and it is suspected that this has not been merely convenient, but fundamental; not a secondary result, but, in too many cases, a primary goal.

The criticism of deconstructionists and deconstruction, however, rarely wholly denies the value of deconstructive thought. Thus, Dwight Eddins concludes that "The theory world is a useful place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there" (4). And many of deconstruction's critics (including most of the ones cited here) are willing to accept some measure of the major tenets of deconstructive theory and acknowledge the extent to which they have contributed to scholarly knowledge about literature and literary study, "within limits." So Alvin Kernan asserts

Within limits, the deconstructionists and special-interest groups were right. Texts *do* lend themselves to more than a single legitimate interpretation, large chunks of language *do* rest not on substantial reality

but on a void, the concerns of women and minorities *have* been largely excluded from critical consideration, and works of art *are* shaped to accord with dominant political and social interests. In the effort to make their point, and their careers, the deconstructors and ideologues had regularly gone to scandalous extremes, but their inflammatory rhetoric had dramatized, melodramatized really, the reality that the old high literature and the fine arts, like other cultural institutions, are not absolutes based on solid, unchanging facts. They are social constructions, filled with contradictions and logical gaps, put together historically out of available beliefs and technologies to satisfy the needs of those who use them. What emerged from the theorization and politicization of literature, however, was not the establishment of new truths about literature, sweeping away old "truths" to make room for a new Truth, but the relativization of all views. (*Plato's* 290-1)

Thus, deconstruction has had something valuable to offer the study of literature, but in practice it has been (it is feared) more dangerous and ultimately destructive than valuable.<sup>5</sup> The idea of "truth" may have its own consequent dangers and the "relativization" of all views may have successfully dismantled or displaced previously

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Fischer similarly maintains the usefulness of a certain measure of deconstructive thought, but holds that "Instead of endangering the academic profession, deconstruction leaves it intact, maybe even more secure" (xiii). He claims that deconstruction's overly inflated concepts render them useless as challenges to the more dubious practices of the academy. He notes, for example, that Derrida "rightly mocks the objectivity of many rules and detects the brute force behind their reasonable façade" but "when he leaps from the arbitrariness of some conventions to the illegitimacy of them all, however, he, too, neutralizes his own complaints" (106). Thus, "A proposal that starts out promising change thus ends up discouraging it" (124). Fischer distinguishes himself from critics who fear the potential danger of

unquestioned political and social preconceptions, such that scholarly work on literature is, one hopes, more self-aware and less presumptuous than it previously has been. But, it is commonly feared that the "relativization of all views" strips away the positive authority claimed for literature in the past, and deconstruction is criticized for the extent to which it has contributed to a "discourse on what literature cannot be and cannot do" (Woodring 132). Thus, the criticism of deconstruction moves from the charge of a basic improbability in the world at large, to a perceived impracticality inside the academy. For (not only is it affirmed that the world at large operates, still, and successfully, *with* practical notions of certainty, truth and value), the absence of "truth" and "value" operates dangerously, perhaps even disastrously, inside the academy as it is by its very nature an elitist institution dependent upon truth claims.<sup>6</sup> By degrading the authority of the author and the text, by denying the possibility of practical communication and the value of truth, deconstruction has struck a blow at the university, and in particular, at the practice of the humanities, for the basic tenets of reading, writing and teaching depend on these elements of communication, the value of good versus bad interpretation and the very ideas of right and wrong. So Robert Scholes concludes

...if we teachers of the humanities cannot claim... "the love of truth" as a part of our enterprise, that enterprise is in serious trouble... we are in trouble precisely because we have allowed ourselves to be persuaded that

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deconstruction, but he holds with the position that charges deconstruction with hypocrisy in that it claims to achieve (on the merit of its principles) what it cannot, because of the basic futility of those principles.

<sup>6</sup> universities in theory and at their best are not democratic institutions, and they should not be democratic institutions. The basic assumption behind democracy is that at some level everybody's opinion is of equal validity... But we now have an influx of people into the universities at the professorial rank who do not accept the basic assumption of the

we cannot make truth claims but must go on "professing" just the same.

(39)<sup>7</sup>

The problem of questioning all authority in an essentially elitist institution is manifested by the paradoxical nature of deconstruction itself as, in its operation, it must depend upon that which in theory it places into question. Indeed, Derrida himself often makes note of this essential paradox. For example, in his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," he notes: "We have no language--no syntax and no lexicon--which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single deconstructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest" (961). But, he concludes, that one must nonetheless continue, and this

...consists in conserving in the field of empirical discovery all these old concepts, while at the same time exposing here and there their limits, treating them as tools which can still be of use. No longer is any truth-value attributed to them; there is a readiness to abandon them if necessary if other instruments should appear more useful. In the meantime, their relative efficacy is exploited, and they are employed to destroy the old

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university, namely that it is hierarchical, traditionalist, authoritarian, and--above all--elitist. (Searle 214)

<sup>7</sup> The problematic denial of "truth" is a major element of many of the criticisms of deconstructive theory, which, as an issue, comes to a rather dramatic head with the Paul de Man affair. The de Man affair might be fairly identified as the real-life "Deconstruction of Deconstruction" (Bradbury 77), which Bradbury explores through the figure of Mensonge, as critics suggest that de Man's guilty conscience was the driving force behind deconstruction's denial of language's truth-value. For example, Paul Gordon pursues a connection between J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive reading of *Lord Jim* and Miller's later defense of de Man to show that both "rel[y] on a deconstructive denial of truth to excuse human error and accountability" (67).



machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces.

Thus it is that the language of the human sciences criticizes *itself*. (964)

Critiques of deconstructive practice, however, maintain that deconstruction does not, in fact, apply this skepticism to its own work, to its own use of the inefficient but necessary tools of language, and, as a result, (the paradox of deconstruction) manifests an ultimate and untenable hypocrisy in practice. So Michael Fischer notes, "For all its talk of upending hierarchies, poststructuralist criticism, in short, has given new names to old ones, relegating "direct, saleable communication" to the "basement" (to use Hartman's words) and equating self-deconstruction with vitality" (93). At the same time, other critics sardonically question the viability of "the paradox of universal contingency (Is it universally true that there are no universal truths?)" (Argyros 2), maintaining that, "the proposition that nothing can be certain should not incorporate a unique certainty for this proposition" (Woodring 68). Theorists are thus criticized for *using* this sense of paradox, of confessing to it only in order to defy it by employing it to serve their own purposes. Thus, Frederick Crews asserts:

Foucault and Derrida alike thrive on the paradox of casting doubt on the possibility of any secure knowledge while simultaneously advancing foundational propositions of their own that are to be taken entirely on faith. (48)

It is precisely at this juncture that Malcolm Bradbury steps in with his short novel, *Mensonge*. For it is the specific desire of Henri Mensonge to recognize and resolve these paradoxes by demonstrating, heroically, the practical consequences of his theoretical position. So the narrator (and Mensonge's biographer), states "The fact is that

Deconstruction itself [is] based on an illogicality that Mensonge [is] determined to refute" (Bradbury 24). Mensonge attempts to hold true to his theoretical principle by disappearing after the fact of his text, which is uncertain and undecidable and which language wrote anyway, and by positing nothing about nothing "for there is no about about for any thinking to be about, or for that matter not about" (Bradbury 63). The comic extreme of this position may be simply annoying to deconstructionists who have attempted to make it clear that in a deconstructive reading "the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance" (Derrida "Signature" 192). This position seems reasonable, but can, in practice, become much more problematic. Primarily because the place of intention, as with meaning, stands only to be dramatically undermined, and exposed as an example of what cannot fairly be assumed or concluded. Thus, those critical of deconstruction insist that, despite any otherwise stated intention, when the language of a text is interrogated to the extent that neither the text nor the author can any longer retain any reasonable claim to meaning or intent, whether or not it is a central aim, the efficacy of the text *is* compromised, just as the text's assertion of value *is* radically questioned.<sup>8</sup> Bradbury, with his book, specifically targets the practice of deconstructive

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<sup>8</sup> Meaning, it is argued, cannot be separated from value, as the word "value" itself incorporates both the notion of worth *and* meaning. So Kim Worthington states:

Deconstructive textuality may be viewed as emancipatory in so far as it gives interpretative license to readers who may themselves *determine* the meaning of a text and the signs that comprise it: if there are no true, objective meanings, then there are no false ones either, and all textual interpretations are equally valid. But this is deeply problematic for a number of reasons. A stress on subjective interpretative validity can result in the disturbing intuition that if everything means anything, then it is pointless to talk about meanings at all. In the place of traditional notions that legitimate singular textual meaning (such as intentionality), there flourishes instead a profusion of partisan narratives, of subjective interpretations. (76)

criticism as it insists that without meaning there can still be ascertainable value. Indeed, with a certain measure of audacity, Bradbury seems to invite the dismissal that has been articulated in deconstruction's defense. For example, when J. Hillis Miller states in his article entitled "The Triumph of Theory," that

the left and right are often united...in their misrepresentation, their shallow understanding, and their failure to have read what they denounce or their apparent inability to make out its plain sense...[Because] both need to point the finger of blame against theory to avoid thinking through the challenge theory poses to their own ideologies. (284)

this rebuttal seems to *add* comic force to Bradbury's position, rather than detract from it, as the notion of the "plain sense" of deconstructive writing here seems to rebound to an opposite comic extreme, and is, at best, an inapt description of much deconstructive writing. More significantly, however, this description is an example of the paradoxical practice of deconstruction that simultaneously can profess the merits of limitless interpretation and assert impatiently its own plain sense. Finally, whether or not deconstruction ostensibly aims to dismiss texts or their value the function of constantly deferred meaning makes value very difficult to locate, and, in practice, the exposed, endless contradictions of language seem to make the text impossible to fix as well.

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Argyros also rejects the notion that deconstructive "undecidability" does not destabilize meaning (and thus, value) and in his study he "reexamin[es] the notion of value" (3) in order to contest specific tenets of deconstruction. He objects, for example, to what he calls "the quintessential deconstructive statement" made by Johnson in her introduction to Derrida's *La dissemination*, in which she maintains "the idea that the earth goes around the sun is not an improvement of the idea that the sun goes around the earth. It is a shift in perspective that literally makes the ground move. (Derrida 1981a, xv)". Argyros argues instead that "not only can we legitimately claim that one theory may be better than another (for example, that Copernicus was closer to the truth than Ptolemy) but that such value judgments may also be gauged by

*Mensonge* provides a parody of these constant deferrals and negations as the importance of Henri Mensonge's text is examined in its near-absence, and his philosophical contribution touted in the absence of philosophical truth.

With Bradbury's book, this process begins at the level of an insurmountable number of impudent jokes that contrast the philosophically abstract with the defiantly mundane realities of life. Bradbury is clearly hoping to inspire his readers to chuckle their way through the text that, though short at ninety-three pages, is so chock-full of jabs, both direct and indirect, that analyzing it becomes a daunting task. (And will finally, I believe, be a reductive one as it will only be possible to choose representative jokes.) His narration starts with the explanation that "In fact, and to be honest, there is no doubt that Structuralism-Deconstruction has become, to say the least, *chic* (Bradbury 2). So "chic" that *People* magazine, Steven Spielberg, Joan Collins, Robert Redford and Bob Geldof "are said to be interested" (Bradbury 2). The joke, of course, is that even the highest heights of fashion in the academy rarely reach the outside world evidenced by the contents of *People* magazine. This despite the fact that deconstruction has been the great leveler of the pretension of high art versus low art. For all the interest in popular art, in *People* magazine, the desire "to take literary criticism out into real life" has resulted instead in taking "real life in into criticism" (Bradbury 48). The joke extends further to its phrasing, as the assertions "in fact, and to be honest, there is no doubt..." (Bradbury 2) are statements of certainty and authorial intention that are in direct conflict with the basic tenets of Structuralist-Deconstructive thought in the first place. Thus, Bradbury laughs up

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standards that transcend the local and the contingent" (3), and he presents this as an "alternative to the deconstructive worldview" (2).

his sleeve at the attempt to assert definitively the importance of a movement that denies the relevance of definitive statements.

This is Bradbury's most common tactic throughout the book and the assertion that "Deconstruction is proving beyond a doubt that we find ourselves in *the age of the floating signifier*, when word no longer attaches properly to thing, and no highbonding glues can help us" (Bradbury 5) places emphasis on both the inescapable necessity of the phrase "beyond a doubt" and the mundane reality of "highbonding glues" (Bradbury 5). Both, of course, assert themselves in specific contrast to the high-minded realm of theoretical discourse, while underlying a basic practicality that simply and wholly denies the indeterminacy of a language that can and will assert "beyond a doubt," in order to appreciate its sense, just as the displacement of the signifier from the signified might occasion an unimpressed and undaunted request for a highbonding glue. Throughout, Bradbury calls attention to the basic impracticality of assuming an all-encompassing uncertainty in a world that continues to function, relatively simply and easily, by just refusing to suppose it. Thus, the "dismantl[ing] [of] the concept of the 'subject'" (Bradbury 7) does not, as he states, "mak[e] table-setting for a dinner party very difficult indeed" (Bradbury 7). And the "clear gap between the signifier and the signified" does not prevent "those who for some reason supposed the congress was actually being held in Vienna" (Bradbury 11) from meeting and communicating well enough to form the Vienna Circle. Words signify dependably enough to have Mensonge's book "*La Fornication comme acte culturel*" end up in "the kind of bookstore specializing in erotica and in genital technology" (Bradbury 36), although any confusion resulting from the fact that italics are a visual, and not an oral, phenomenon may work to Mensonge's (or

deconstruction's, or language's, or the narrator's, or Bradbury's) advantage when it becomes "soon hardly possible to walk past the café terraces... without overhearing the leading French intellectuals engaging in a constant intense discussion of *La Fornication*" (Bradbury 36), which, of course, is indistinguishable from a rather more common topic of conversation: la fornication.

Throughout the novel (as we have seen), the basic conflict between deconstructive sense and practical sense is replicated by the available language of literary discourse that in its every attempt to assert must consequently deny principles of uncertainty. The words and demands of a philosophical position or declaration of literary merit demand phrasing that deconstruction should theoretically disallow, but upon which it nonetheless depends. As Bradbury phrases it, this is the paradox of attempting to delineate "nothing other than a profound modern philosophy *of*, precisely, absences" (21), which results in the main problem of deconstruction: "that having identified the crisis in language, the gap of the signifier and the signified, it then *continued to employ it*. Thus it continued to sustain the illusory notion that it was possible for philosophy to *mean something*" (Bradbury 63). Bradbury's text continually questions how deconstructive philosophy can mean, state, communicate its "plain sense," when it derogates the possibility of these things. He questions how Derrida, arguing, "with a totally convincing philosophical obscurity" (Bradbury 23), can make it "*clear* that everything [has] been deconstructed... [that] the proper noun, the author, the self, the book, the object, the reader, the referent, the real, [are] all floating items of signification without a base" (*italics mine*, Bradbury 23), without depending on his authority as a philosopher, on his intentions as a writer, on the ability of his books to communicate those intentions reliably

and to articulate sensibly his theoretical position, to a reader with a verifiable presence as both reader and thinker, capable of being persuaded. And, furthermore, and finally, to what does this process lead? The narrator seems to suggest that it is just an elaborate way to get lost, declaring "This bold sequence of philosophical developments made for clarity and brought us to where we are today, wherever that may be" (Bradbury 23).

Indeed, the nature of the narrator's project itself is essentially compromised by this paradox for he is caught attempting to assert the value of the certainty of uncertainty through the figure of the undeniably influential, but practically unread, Mensonge. Thus, he is called upon to insist, nonsensically, "whether or not [Mensonge] exists we cannot do without him," and maintain "He has, quite simply, become *inescapable*" (Bradbury 39) while lamenting his retreat into almost total obscurity. Meanwhile, success for the narrator at immortalizing Mensonge, celebrating his philosophy, and his status as a thinker, can only *refute* the value of Mensonge's philosophical tenets. It is the narrator's aim to make it evident "why many people, very thoughtful people, or so they were once, regard Mensonge's book as *the* ultimate work of Deconstruction, the 'fullest' and most 'complete'", but, to do so, he is forced to admit that he will only "undermine Mensonge's intention" (Bradbury 80). Mensonge's intention (itself, paradoxically understood and communicated) is to disallow the paradox into which the narrator initiates himself by attempting to commemorate Mensonge as a pivotal figure in Structuralist-Deconstructive thought, thereby undermining Mensonge's expressed desire to resist the illogical position of other disciples of deconstruction, such as Derrida, Barthes and Foucault,

who have persisted in being present even when there is no logical ground  
for them to be so. [They keep] hanging around campuses, publishing new

books, turning up at parties--even though the fundamental principles of their own cognition should tell them that in the very least they should remain in the non-privacy of their own homes. (Bradbury 25)

It is Mensonge's contention that the persistent presences of deconstructive theorists, and the reputations that make them notable figures on campus and at parties and as authors of new books, are not logically consistent with their stated beliefs. Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile many of the basic tenets of deconstructive theory with the fact that those tenets have been instrumental in forwarding careers. For how can it be logically possible that the "scriptors" of "Death of an Author" and "What is an Author?" have become famous authors in their own right, at least in part, on the "strength" and "value" of those works? In contrast, Mensonge's "non-presence is evidence of a profound philosophical heroism" (Bradbury 24), for it stands as evidence of a staunch belief in his own principles, a willingness, so to speak, for Mensonge to "put his money where his mouth is" (if, in fact, he were to have either). He explains,

...has it not been inevitable that, having written as "I" have "written", having thought as "I" have "thought", I should then refuse to be "here", or "there", or "anywhere else" for that matter?...Let it be enough that you have the good fortune to have a text to read. Do not ask that there be an "I" who wrote it. For if there were an "I", it could not be an "it", for it would reconstruct that metaphysics of presence "it" has determined to destroy. Thus we would have wasted a good deal of time I am sure both of us, or neither, could have spent in far better ways. (Bradbury 24)



Through *Mensonge*, Bradbury accuses the practitioners of deconstructive theory for practicing what they preach *against*, and, more to the point, for benefiting from it. For, as his narrator, explains, after deconstructive theory made it clear

...that we no longer knew quite what anything meant anymore, a new method in the study of literature called creative misreading, or maps of misprision, began, as it were, to bloom. It abolished authors, and replaced them by readers, who turned out to need a lot of critics to help them misunderstand in the proper way. (Bradbury 15)

With a nod to Harold Bloom, Bradbury makes it clear that a key consequence of the deconstructive critic has been to discredit the authority of the author in order to grant greater authority to him/herself. He also accuses deconstructionists of discrediting the value of *other* texts in order to extol the, thereby augmented, value of their own, such that, "...students everywhere ...carr[ied] with them the new texts, or rather anti-texts, the texts that said all the texts except these particular texts were dead" (Bradbury 14).

So, although deconstruction has made many weighty claims for itself in all that it has allowed and all that it has exposed, and although it is congratulated for interrogating systems of thought, it has ironically dispossessed and discredited both authors and literature as it has evolved into one of the indisputable Grand Theories it sought to challenge.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it has become itself tyrannical, and, even more importantly, dangerous,

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<sup>9</sup> Barbara Johnson, for example, asserts clearly the popular rebuttal to positions like Bradbury's, who, it is maintained, has necessarily misunderstood deconstructive theory. She explains, "What these caricatures do is to transform the deconstructive *questioning* of absolute claims into new absolute claims" (*Wake* 26). She thus identifies the "passion to denounce theory" as springing, in part, "from confusing undecidability with meaninglessness" (*Wake* 90). It is Bradbury's position, however, (and many of the other critics cited herein) that deconstructive principle is making a false distinction by refusing to acknowledge the connection between "undecidability" and meaninglessness, and, more importantly, that its defenders expose in their

as it has proscribed our understanding and appreciation for the value of literature in such a way that has left it (and the humanities) vulnerable to attacks that question its purpose, and challenge its importance. Accordingly, Mensonge's biographer remarks that Barthes' "Death of the Author,"

was particularly popular with publishers, who quickly realized that, if you said that authors wrote books, you had to pay them, whereas if you claimed that readers did, they had the habit of paying you, a much more effective commercial arrangement. (Bradbury 22)

He remarks that considering the basic hostility toward writers,

there was little wonder that Barthes's book achieved massive sales.

[but] unfortunately because of the nature of its argument he was unable to claim the royalties, and since he was living by writing at the time he soon found himself in difficulties. (Bradbury 22)

While this entire passage is propelled by its comic exaggeration, the implications of these statements are very pointed as Bradbury depicts Barthes' ability to make money and achieve fame writing on the death of the author as an essentially cannibalistic activity (Barthes is nourishing himself on the "death" of his own kind, more or less). Mensonge, in specific contrast, stands as "the ultimate case of Deconstructionist *integrity*" (Bradbury 27). But it is clear that Bradbury is not meaning to recommend or even condone Mensonge's claim to be "a totally *absent absence*" (Bradbury 26). The narrator may

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own logic the necessary flaw in deconstruction by becoming impatient with "undecidability" only, and as soon as, it is applied to the theory they are defending (Johnson's cited notions of "caricature" and "confusion," for example, presuppose verifiable, *decidable*, meaning, as does her attempt to clarify that particular meaning).

congratulate Mensonge for being more consistent than his co-deconstructionists, but it is clear that Bradbury's reader is meant to see, first, the improbability and, secondly, the basic impracticality of his position. Mensonge is not more noble than other deconstructionists, but more stubborn, and what he and all deconstructionists should be able to see is that this basic impracticality effectively refutes the viability of deconstructive theory. The problem is not that deconstructionists refuse to disappear, but the fact that they do not and cannot fails convincingly to demonstrate to them that it is impossible and illogical to maintain what they cannot uphold.

As a consequence, and in this spirit, Bradbury's criticism of deconstruction is often exceedingly plain. He argues that it is just illogical to pretend, for example, that "...writers do not write but get written, and by *something outside themselves*" (Bradbury 21). And, he mocks the premise that "What writes books is nothing other than... *language itself*" (Bradbury 21), by creating a scenario in which

so effective is language that it has frequently arrived early in the morning, sat down at the typewriter, and as good as completed half a day's work before the average so-called author is even showered, dressed and got through his breakfast *croissant*. (Bradbury 21-2)

The matter-of-fact description of the "so-called" author showering, dressing and eating before he sits down to his typewriter effectively uses the practical experience of the author to simply and flatly deny the suggestion that anyone or anything else has written the text, even theoretically. Only, and because, it is not consistent with what people, and certainly authors (whether they write fiction or criticism), know about the task of writing. Indeed, the deconstructionists' avoidance of the words "book" and "work" in reference to

"text," evades an undeniable truth rooted in the author's struggle to get words to the page. (Certainly, it defies this writer's experience to suggest that, with my own text, I have drawn from an "immense dictionary from which [comes] a writing that *can know no halt*" (italics mine, Barthes 147).) Bradbury suggests that it might be acceptable for the author to disown his/her work, or be dispossessed of it, if it was just such an easy, almost reflexive, thing to do, or to have done for you. But it isn't. To suggest that writing must be, by necessity, absolutely divorced from the author's "passions, humours, feelings, [and] impressions" (Barthes 147), to suggest that writing cannot be fairly termed expression, but is instead some kind of automatic scribing that only *uses* a person, simply flies in the face of most every writer's experience as a self, writing. And while some may object that this opposition merely springs from the injured ego of the writer, straining to guard his/her "author"ity, this idea is also importantly inconsistent with the study of literature, the humanities, and the function of the university itself.<sup>10</sup> As has been discussed, the death of the author should, first of all, preclude the possibility of authors (that is, writers and critics) garnering the privileges of high repute (including the privileges of teaching and publishing) through their work. But it must also, by extension, preclude the possibility of defenses or grades, for both depend on, not only the security of the bond between author and text, but also on the value of judgments and the communicative value, and authority, of letters A-D, and F (as well as pluses and minuses). Bradbury proposes

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<sup>10</sup> This is not meant to assume that the university is inviolable, nor that it should be, but it does presuppose that destruction, tearing down, criticizing, challenging and questioning the work of the university should be balanced and indeed, motivated, by a viable alternate vision if it is to be protected and maintained as an important part of our society. As Argyros states: "...a theoretical paradigm cannot be undermined by criticism or analysis alone. Criticism may be a necessary first step, a kind of philosophical or ideological picador, but it must be followed by a model that is presented as more valuable than the one being deconstructed" (5).

that deconstructive theory, ironically, disputes the function of the university in which it thrives, noting that, when "Foucault revealed that [in history] there are no causes and no effects, or at least not in that order...it was no longer possible to sit exams in the subject" (Bradbury 49).

Mensonge's stance, though commended by the narrator, creates similar problems for the narrator's scholarship, as he is forced to acknowledge, "...from the point of view of serious scholarship ...his honest stance has left us with some very considerable difficulties" (Bradbury 27). The narrator faces the problem of having to comment on a book from which the author not only has disappeared, but first managed to linger long enough to insist that "his" "words have disappeared from the book as a text, and in a sense it is *just not there at all*" (Bradbury 66). Mensonge contends

'This is the book I did not write...and I refuse to acknowledge it as not mine... You will find nothing in it, since that was all I could put there. Yet surely to read a book demonstrating the folly of thinking demonstrates the folly of thinking far less well than refusing to read it in the first place...' [or] as he says in another passage for the reader foolish enough to have read on: 'This work should be considered as having been "written" entirely in "quotes", or better in "'quotes"'. None of it says, little of it does, and all of it denies, says that it does not say.' (Bradbury 66)

Here, Mensonge performs his ultimate act of "intellectual heroism" (Bradbury 84), thereby resolving the inconsistency from which deconstruction suffers (and that Bradbury depicts as both opportunistic and unfair) by deconstructing his text and himself.

Mensonge promotes a theory that suggests the writer can no longer make any claim to

definitive meaning; accordingly, this makes it impossible for him to forward an argument, which makes philosophy or theory a very tricky thing indeed. Since "the proper noun, the author, the self, the book, the object, the reader, the referent, [and] the real" have all been deemed "without a base" (Bradbury 23), Mensonge's text offers only uncertainty and absence, and then refuses to admit it offers anything at all, such that "...the entire point to his argument is that we may find no entire point to his argument" (Bradbury 78).

When faced with this determined absence, the narrator is consequently only able to comfort, and presumably, motivate himself in his scholarship by suggesting, "Perhaps, then, we may give [Mensonge's] book a modern *misreading*" (Bradbury 66), gaining encouragement from Mensonge's claim that he "agree[s] with those modern scholars who insist to us that no interpretation can be anything other than a misinterpretation" (Although, he adds "Of course, I may have misunderstood them" (Bradbury 66).) It is clear that Mensonge's text, by defying meaning, defies scholarship, and the narrator laments "You know, quite frankly, and just between ourselves, it is no easy business just trying to be an ordinary workmanlike scholar these days" (Bradbury 67). Ultimately, the only way to pursue scholarship on Mensonge is to defy him and, importantly, his theoretical stance. For, once "on a quest" to establish "the meaning of Mensonge," and determine "his importance," the narrator-scholar admits "we need to know the gist of his great book," (Bradbury 66), as a result, "I have, in these circumstances ...decided...to defy Mensonge *just as he defies us*, and attempt to offer...a brief account, an imperfect summary, of the contents of his contentless work (Bradbury 67). And the gist is that Mensonge, following bravely the ends of deconstructive theory, finds the end of all

thought, for, "thinking strives to preserve the presence it has seemed to destroy"

(Bradbury 76). The narrator explains:

The great triumph of Mensonge's book is here, and it is nothing less than the proof of the delusory notion of philosophy itself, and the deconstruction of its false endeavour to maintain what he called 'the non-existent ego of the scholar him/her non-self.' Here is the brilliance of Mensonge's study, which truly follows the consequence of Deconstruction's own logic--which must evidently lead to the Deconstruction of Deconstruction itself... And it is here the path comes very near to its close, in a fundamental deconstruction of intellectuality itself which is Mensonge's great contribution to knowledge, or rather to the end of it. (Bradbury 76-7)

Thus, to forward the value of deconstructive thought requires turning its tenets on itself, and the result is, simply, nothing. For (to be Mensongian about it), thought and philosophy cannot exist on the bare merit of what is not left.

Bradbury also makes a play on the "meaning of Mensonge," as a phrase that denotes, simultaneously, the study of the man's "contentless work" (Bradbury 67), his own "totally *absent absence*" (Bradbury 26), and, more literally, the meaning of the French word "mensonge," which in English translates to "a lie, or falsehood" (or, as Mensonge later breaks down his own name in a style typically deconstructive, "me en songe" [myself in a dream] (Bradbury 79)). Bradbury is playing here, to a certain degree, with Foucault's idea from "What is an Author?" that states "the author's name is not... just a proper name like the rest... it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse"

(981). For, when as in *Mensonge*'s case, this incorporates the idea of "a lie," it becomes clear that Bradbury is, reductively, realizing the point of Foucault's text. For example, Foucault writes, "the author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse." It "manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and culture" (Foucault 982). What all this comes back to is that the mode of discourse, its appearance and status, all concern a lie. While this may seem to support what Bradbury has throughout the text brought into question, it is ultimately only to prove the futility of this position as Bradbury is more specifically targetting Derrida's study into "the abyss of the proper name" (Bradbury 83, Derrida 28) in *Signéponge/Signsponge*. In this study, Derrida admits "Every philosopher denies the idiom of his name, of his language, of his circumstance, speaking in concepts and generalities that are necessarily improper" (32), and wherein he conducts an extensive study on the poet Francis Ponge's name, and by extension his poetry, all of which culminates in the question that if Francis Ponge "had had another name, and if by some incredible hypothesis he could still have been the same person, would he have written *the same thing?*" (Bradbury 83, Derrida 116). This question leads the narrator in *Mensonge* to speculate similarly

Is it perhaps possible, by the same incredible hypothesis, that *Mensonge* had another name? If he had, would he have written *another thing?* And is it--the thought grows more daring--possible that *Derrida* had another



name? Could it be that the other name of each one of them was none other than the name of...? Is it then just conceivable...? (Bradbury 84)<sup>11</sup>

This suggests not that the author-function is a lie and as such the author-function of *Mensonge* is a lie, but that the author, *Mensonge*, is Derrida's lie. Thus, the author-function remains intact; it may be avoided or deferred, but it has not been invalidated, perhaps, because it is necessary, or at least intrinsic, to scholarship. Just as the aims (and limits) of truth and value are necessary to the function of the university, the presence of the author does function in the realm of scholarship even in the Structuralist-Deconstructionist discourse, as the spectre of a looming Derrida proves. For if "Mensonge" is meant to be Derrida's "lie" or "me [meaning Derrida] en songe" then the matter of Bradbury's book gains something more specific, his satire becomes more resonant as it targets the authorship of the famous deconstructionist, who, of course, is not supposed to have one. Bradbury adds another twist when he reveals, at around the same time, that "Malcolm Bradbury" is the name of the narrator of the book *Mensonge*, a fact that may only be a revelation if we defy Foucault's position, and his quote that serves as the epigraph to the book: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (Foucault

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<sup>11</sup> The narrator with this question, of course, is immediately confronted once again with the difficulty of scholarly pursuit in the absence of meaning or decidability. For, coming to the matter of this "lie" leads the scholar right back into the "Mensongian cul-de-sac", and he is forced to correct himself:

"Conceivable!" Of course, the word can no longer be said, or written. And these important speculations are really too difficult for someone like myself, an ordinary scholar. No, we should stick to the facts, such as they are, or in *Mensonge*'s case, mostly are not. Nonetheless, the quest goes on... (Bradbury 84)

Of course, this speculation can only remain groundless, and as such, it is without meaning, just as it is without limitation. That is, possibilities may abound once the scholar is not restricted by notions of truth or value or meaning, because they require some attempt at proof and reasoned argument. This *allows* the critic so much more in the realm of speculation but leaves him/her with so much less. (This observation, thus, stands as a critique of Derrida's *Signésponge/Signsponge* as a morass of speculation without

988). If it makes a difference that "Malcolm Bradbury" is the name of the narrator-persona of this text, or, furthermore, that he is the writer of this text, if it matters that the "floating signifier" of his name attaches itself

to many discrete signifieds: Bradbury the campus novelist, Bradbury the Professor of American Studies, Bradbury the Booker Prize judge, Bradbury the TV adapter of postmodernist novelists...Bradbury the tireless international conference-goer and British Council Lecturer (Bradbury 90)

then the importance, and the effect, of his authorship is realized, which suggests that it cannot be denied.

Bradbury, in fact, seems to insinuate that authorship has never been truly abandoned by the deconstructionists, though its relevance is often ostensibly denied. For example, in the "Foreword/Afterword [of the novel-study] by Michel Tardieu, Professor of Structuralist Narratology... Translated by David Lodge," there is speculation about the discrepancies between the narrator Malcolm Bradbury and the real Malcolm Bradbury that cause Tardieu to ask "Who is Malcolm Bradbury?" (Bradbury 91) (the rumour that "the novels of Bradbury are actually written by David Lodge, or *vice versa* is also mentioned in order to problematize the "fact" of Bradbury). These facts and problems surrounding Bradbury are established only to be abandoned on the strength of the "profound observation by Roland Barthes" that "Linguistically, the Author is never more than the instance writing" (Bradbury 92, Barthes 145). Accordingly, Tardieu turns to

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foundation and/or purpose.) Thus, the notion of the possible connection between Derrida and Mensonge can be evoked, but not ultimately pursued.

Bradbury's text as "our best guide in the quest for *his* identity" and finds "two persistently recurring features: the motif of *food* and the rhetorical figure of *bathos* (Bradbury 92).

This observation gives rise to the question: "what does this repeated convergence of food-references and bathos signify?" along with the assurance that "the conclusion is inescapable" (Bradbury 92). Tardieu's conclusion is that Bradbury's book

... apparently designed to heap praise and honour upon Mensonge and his ideas, is in fact a displaced expression of a deeply repressed desire to cover them with something entirely different. This discovery should occasion no surprise. Most of us who work in the field of contemporary critical theory are subject, periodically, to the same desire. (Bradbury 92)

This emphasizes the hostility that Bradbury identifies in deconstructionist theory, but it also makes it clear that Bradbury's text still speaks for Bradbury. And Tardieu's conclusion (though it defends itself by making it clear what the text provides) presumably starts and definitely finishes with the author. For, it is Tardieu's supposedly, and self-confessed, illegitimate identification of Malcolm Bradbury as the author of the text that quite clearly leads to the conclusion that Bradbury's apparent praise is in fact lightly disguised... resentment. Bradbury's authorship and the critic's conclusions are therefore dependent upon one another, and thus the much touted "Death of the Author" is depicted in Bradbury's text as only, and simply, an attempt by deconstructionists to dispossess the author of his authority in order to claim it as their own.

This is made clear by the fact that after the disappearance of Mensonge, and the imminent disappearance of his text, what will be left, and thereby rendered doubly important, is the narrator's (M. Bradbury's) scholarship. This is made necessary by

deconstructive theory as it so thoroughly compromises the integrity of the primary text. As Bradbury presents it, the "impossibility" of the post-structuralist product that requires the scholar to simultaneously "work in the language and dismantle it conceptually" (Bradbury 93) ultimately makes the text work to disprove itself. Tardieu explains

Jacques Derrida has attempted escape from this *impasse* by the ingenious device of placing words *sous rature* or 'under erasure', signified by crossing them through in the text and thus warning the reader not to accept them at philosophic face value... The reader of this book would be well advised, before he does anything else, to go carefully through it crossing out every page with diagonal strokes. (Bradbury 93)

Thus, the fact of the text, and its own words, compromise the text's theoretical premise, but only to the point that deconstructionists attempt to, ineffectively, dodge the paradox that has them attempting to simultaneously call into question what they admittedly require. Mensonge, however, sets a higher standard as "the ultimate case of Deconstructionist *integrity*" (Bradbury 27), and so,

It is rumoured that Henri Mensonge devised a still more radical method of placing his discourse *sous rature*; that a certain acid was added in the manufacture of the paper on which *La Fornication* was printed which will ensure that sooner or later all copies of this seminal text will auto-destruct. If true, this report would explain why copies of Mensonge's masterwork are so hard to obtain, and render M. Bradbury's account of it uniquely precious. (Bradbury 93)

Thus, the "account" becomes more lasting and more precious than the work itself and the theoretical critic gains ascendancy over his subject, which is, presumably, what he has been working toward all along.

In Robert Grudin's *Book*, theoretical principle is less specifically targeted, while, in some ways, it is even more vehemently dismissed. While Bradbury advances his criticism of Structuralist-Deconstructive thought by challenging the wisdom of its major precepts, Grudin's attack focuses more specifically on *theorists*. Grudin depicts the university as a place in which theory is privileged at the specific cost of creativity and free thought. He depicts theorists as power-hungry, politically-driven opportunists whose theoretical positions answer to a barely repressed tendency for violence and an even less-successfully repressed presumptive arrogance. But, while Grudin's novel creates this rather extreme impression of the potential evils of theorists, the major elements of his criticism locate widely-held fears of the function and practice of theory in the university environment.

Most notably, Grudin places theory in an antithetical relationship to creative writing or authorship, picking up not only from Bradbury, but from critics who worry about the consequences of the "basic opposition in intellectual impulse between those who erect imaginary worlds and those who seek to excavate the foundations of this one" (Jehlen 41). The suggestion is that once theory demoted the "author" to the position of "scriptor" and depicted writing as a manifestation of cultural bias, the theorist was automatically placed in an adversarial relationship with writing, and writers. Thus, theoretical ideology began to concentrate on finding "ways to expose... misrepresentations and false ideals, to strip away the lie and expose the liar" (Jehlen 41).

The result of this assumption occasioned a dramatic shift in the traditional relationship between critic and literature, for, upon

...discovering the complicity of texts with an ideology they never formally articulate, critics tend to assume that they are smarter and more honest than the writers, who either didn't know what they were doing, or, worse, thought they could get away with their devious moves. (Levine 2-3)<sup>12</sup>

Bradbury has depicted this shift in the relationship between author and critic as a political maneuver on the part of theorists who, at some level, set out to gain power over the old "Author-God," and thereby alter their characterization in the traditional literary discourse that held them as secondary to the primary realm of creative expression. Bradbury's argument, therefore (as part of his attempt to deconstruct Deconstruction), derives in large part *from* Structuralist-Deconstructive theory itself in that it locates, and

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Brooks similarly claims,

Forgetting that they are only chameleon poets, critics end up speaking as if they were virtuous philosophers... There is indeed often a measure of moral arrogance in the critical stance that derives, *grosso modo*, from Foucault, who often gives the impression that we, as analysts, know better--better than the deluded discourses we are unmasking... Virtuous philosophizing really undoes the work of situating knowledge, and knower in relation to it. It tacitly assumes a place of privilege--within contemporary American academia, of all places--from which it proffers its discourse. (164)

Paul Gordon also describes this assumed "place of privilege," which he attributes to deconstruction (and thus Derrida). He, in league with M.H. Abrams, describes this as an anti-humanist stance that reveals what he terms deconstruction's "poetics of narcissism." He explains,

Deconstructive attempts...to obfuscate the human are actually the result of an attempt to overcome "original sins" (that is, our state of fallenness as ordinary human beings) by denying the realities of human experience and substituting in their place a narcissistic model of omnipotent non-differentiation...to accept "the crime of theoretical ruthlessness" as de Man urges us to do...means to accept the destruction of all human values and ethical imperatives, none of which can survive deconstruction's "ruthless," Ockhamian denial of meaning...such theoretical sophistication is in fact an all-too-human, narcissistic attempt to transcend our basic humanity. (78-9)

Many of theory's major tenets are discussed by critics as veiled attempts to empower themselves, which is a notion consistent with the characterization of Grudin's theorists.

thereby establishes, the power bias behind concepts of truth and value. The isolation of this power bias operates to functionally reduce the realm of ideas into competing desires for influence and control. As a result, ideas lose their autonomy, and the discourse in the humanities becomes estranged from notions of good and bad in the service of notions of political power, either Left or Right. This results in what Frederick Crews calls a "self-ratifying discourse." He explains,

Self-ratifying discourse...As the name is meant to convey...traffics in apriorism and tends to be openly contemptuous toward ideas of truth. Lacking an ethic of appeal to evidential scruples, it focuses only on congenial instances that serve to keep contrary evidence well out of consideration; it tends to supplant measured argumentation with appeals to group solidarity; it indulges a taste for diffusely explanatory terms such as capitalism, the West, logocentrism, and patriarchy; and it takes a tone of moral absolutism toward the past and, as well, toward the commentator's adversaries, who, instead of being chided for careless reasoning or incomplete knowledge, are typically condemned as harbouring an intolerably retrograde social or political attitude. (52)<sup>13</sup>

Once notions of truth and value become retrograde, the necessity for objective or reasoned argument is radically compromised as any attempt to be objective can be dismissed as a coded desire to enforce personal bias and assert private authority. Without objectivity, the discourse thereby moves from one that is defined by contemplation and

debate into one fueled by passionate zeal and competitive strength. This threatens to reduce what can be reasonably termed a discourse into an all-out tug of war, where the middle ground becomes a dead zone and neither side has the luxury to do anything but react instinctively and pull. Thus, a discourse of potentially endless variety is reduced into a string of polar opposites. As, once no one has the luxury of neutrality (as was discussed in the previous chapter), everyone is required to declare their allegiances along political lines. This politicization, it is argued,

has been very successful in polarizing the humanities... The basic polarizing tactic here is to line up the various *critical* approaches at the two *political* extremes... [although] The facts clearly show... that there is no necessary connection between critical approaches and political positions. (Levin 67)

In such a contested, polarized space, academics lose their ability to contend with opposition outside the realm of conflict. And conflict becomes the norm in an environment that begins to compromise, rather than nurture, the possibility of a continuing exchange of ideas. Instead, academics are increasingly motivated, and indeed overcome, by the need to defend their (necessarily) staunchly-held positions for and against one another. Thus, M.H. Abrams states

I don't have confidence that the divergence between a confirmed humanist and a confirmed poststructuralist stands much chance of being overcome by rational argument; in each instance, the initiating position, or founding

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<sup>13</sup> The threat of this is considered important as "the recent history of the academy suggests that in the short run, empirically grounded theories stand little chance against aprioristic ones if the latter also happens to be



intuition, is too thoroughly implicated in an overall outlook to be vulnerable to counterreasoning from an alternative outlook. (30)

Once all critical approaches, and indeed all analyses, are determined to be in the service of political agendas (either hidden, declared, or both), and once reasoned debate becomes an ineffective tool for the advancement of ideas, and the probability of compromise or neutrality increasingly impossible, the function of the humanities is (perhaps even hopelessly) compromised, as debate begins to serve polarization instead of thought. As such, Richard Levin identifies "...an extension of...the basic principle of polarization, that insists

not only are all those who are not with us against us, but also all those who are not completely *against them* must be completely *for them*. Neutrality or impartiality...are out of the question in the world constructed by the far right and far Left as a Manichean total war of Good against Evil. In such a world, as Sprinker insists, 'the only real question...is: Which side are you on?' (116). (76)

So, critics declare "Something mean has entered our debates" (Hassan 122) and the idea of advancing the cause of criticism, which in the past has been identified with principles of thought, study and knowledge, is overcome by advancing the Causes of Critics. In the absence of reasoned debate and objective knowledge, authority resides in claims to political judgment and moral righteousness.<sup>14</sup> This creates a problem that compromises any and every critic's good intentions. Because moral pronouncements can be *made* by

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politically fervent" (Crews 60).

any and everyone, and once the desire to make them becomes indistinguishable from the desire to make a claim for personal authority or advance one's career, it is widely suspected that, in fact, "The end is power, indeed self-empowerment, the means a pretense of the higher moral ground" (Hassan 127).

The key feature of this problem then, in English, is that all this theoretical positioning and political posturing distracts from, rather than intensifies, the critic's relationship with literature.<sup>15</sup> Robert Scholes identifies this as a time when critics "know less literature...because they must know more critical theory and [they] can't, after all, know everything..." (81). And Alvin Kernan asserts

My problem with the new approaches is not their accuracy or fairness, only their usefulness in maintaining and preserving the works of literature, or the "texts" if that term is preferable, on which the entire literary enterprise, past and present, depend... Give away, lose, or discredit these texts--Homer, Shakespeare, Balzac--and literature is out of business... Take away the works that are still for the moment agreed to be literature, and what is left? Only a hodgepodge of institutional odds and ends without a center, a decaying instructional system, a set of professional arrangements, a library category, a high-culture avant-garde art circle, a few publishers and reviewers, a few passing political social causes. (*Death* 212)

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<sup>14</sup> This recalls Richard Russo's discussion of "the unholy trinity of insensitivity, sexism and bigotry" in *Straight Man* (73).

In Robert Grudin's *Book*, the social consequences of the theory debate are investigated and theorists are exposed (as Grudin would have it) for their social shortcomings, neuroses and even psychoses. The estrangement from literature, seen by some scholars as a result of the theory debate, is characterized in *Book* as an ostensible *goal* of theorists who have little regard for literature, and contempt for creative writers, as they are defined in their relationship with theory by their desire for power and control. In Grudin's novel, the university promotes this behaviour as it coincides with the "timeworn obligations" of its administrators who perform their duty by "stifling talent and rewarding mediocrity, promoting faddishness and punishing integrity, [and by] rejecting the most impassioned and justified individual plea yet acquiescing to every whim of political interest" (Grudin 9-10). The administration, as represented by the provost, J. Thoreau Marshall, thus, cooperates with the scheming Glanda Gazza, the English department head, in order to make *Book's* hero, the novelist, Adam Snell's life "the closest academic approximation of living hell" (Grudin 11). Snell has offended the powers that be in the university by writing a university novel that manages to hit

Ideologically speaking, the weaknesses of most anyone who would be professionally qualified to read it: [depicting] the reactionary postures embedded in liberal institutions, the institutional phobia for real inquiry, the moral barrenness of the modern intellectual, the polite dishonesties of daily life. (Grudin 29)

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<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps significant, then, that in a recent interview, Derrida has disclosed: "Telling or inventing stories is something that deep down (or rather on the surface!) does not interest me particularly" ("Strange" 39-40).

Snell's book focuses on Sovrana Sostrata, whose story is "like Snell's in many ways" (Grudin 29). Sovrana "stuns the literary and academic worlds with *Gesta*, a free-form philosophical work...[in which] the most scandalous element is... Sovrana's position on the history of gender relationships" (Grudin 29). Her position is radical in that it challenges the traditional indictment of the male (most notable in militant feminist discourse) as the prime cause of the oppression of women, in part, as an attempt to reassert the value of "male-female intimacy" (Grudin 120). The unfashionable nature of this position results in gaining for Sovrana "Much money, brief fame and a swift kick out of the academic world. [Because] the academic world has ways of getting rid of people who think too freely or say too much" (Grudin 30). Snell, similarly, has created enemies for himself in the academic world with his novel, which asks questions it is not supposed to ask. His main adversaries include the administrator Marshall, but the novel focuses primarily on his department head, Glanda Gazza, and a colleague in the English department, Frank Underwood, both of whom are characterized by their intolerance for Snell's person and book by their allegiance to theory.

Frank Underwood is "America's fastest-rising literary theorist" (Grudin 25), author of *Dismembering Discourse: A Study in the Muteness of Power* (Grudin 40), and a well-respected member of the University of Washagon's English department. He is also a psychotic, who is prone to murderous violence. After a troubled adolescence, bullied by an heroic older brother, Frank is left emotionally unstable. This instability takes on psychotic proportion after Frank's brother, Gerald, is both mentally and physically injured in the Vietnam war, and thus is no longer able to fulfill Frank's need for "his adolescent nemesis and phobic source of neurotic stability" (Grudin 119). Frank is "saved" after

Gerald's ruin in large part by literary theory, which becomes an outlet for his psychic disturbance, for,

The brand of theory he inhaled... was tailor-made for Underwood's worldview and uniquely appropriate to his private compulsions.

[It]... painted an amoral, asymmetrical human world, barren of esthetic meaning and substantive only in terms of the power patterns which...

played across its face. This vertiginous cosmos allowed of no solid meaning or knowledge. Beauty, wisdom and order were empty

rationalizations. Love, sympathy and trust were vulgar buzzwords.

Competition reigned supreme, and the best competitors were those who could understand and exploit the then-dominant patterns of power.

(Grudin 119)

The charge is clear. Without beauty, wisdom, order, love, sympathy or trust, theory creates a world that answers to a psychotic vision. It is plainly reductive, degrading that which is vital and rich about human experience, while establishing competition and power as ends in themselves. This is consistent with Frank's very conscious manipulation of theoretical principle, as he admits to himself, "Language relaxes you, draws you out, connects you with a world of innocent pleasure and trust" (Grudin 40), while remarking "Strange that your personal dependency on language contrasts so sharply with your professional critique of it. Strange, but true, even necessary" (Grudin 41). In Frank's perception of a world fueled by competition and power, attempting to answer to his own, native, innocent pleasure and trust in language is unnecessary to the extent that it cannot serve him. It would not serve Frank to posit currently unfashionable ideas about language

in a community that has proven hostile to original thought. Thus, Frank competes, "plays the game," with no understanding of any alternate value to the realm of theoretical discourse.

It is important to note, however, that Frank's behaviour is not unique as an expression of his individual psychosis, but is importantly paralleled to other like-minded theoretical careerists who were "much gladdened by [Frank's book's] bibliographic arrival... [as] it gave [them] a new vocabulary for extending positions they had already developed" (Grudin 41). Frank's book is importantly not creative, but "bibliographic,"<sup>16</sup> and it is welcomed on the academic scene to the extent to which it fails to challenge or change the ideas of other theorists. Indeed, "from feminists to deconstructionists, the theoretical world" welcomes Frank's book, because theorists are reaffirmed and served by it, since it allows them to continue to advance their positions without progressing in them.

Frank (because of his brother's artistic sensibilities) feels suspicious and hostile toward art in general and literature specifically, and theory is important to him in large part because it allows him to revel in his rejection of literature. Theory teaches him that

Literature ha[s] no implicit human meaning at all. Literature meant what people interpreted it to mean, or what people could convince others that it meant... the so-called classics... were no longer corpora to be studied with appreciative attention. Rather they were like empty palaces, ripe for occupation by militant forces of interpretation. The literary

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<sup>16</sup> The narrator's description, "bibliographic," is one that keeps Frank's work very securely in the traditionally considered *secondary* relationship of criticism to art, in contrast to theory's pretension to a higher status, while Adam Snell's innovative, compelling and original work, would, by extension, be a *primary* source.

theorist could become a commandant, an avenger ravaging decadent forms and establishing arbitrary authority. (Grudin 119)

Literary theory allows Frank to act out his violent rejection of literature, and answers to his deep-seated insecurities in the face of its (once assumed) value. It gives him a way to enact a vicious, retributive dismantling of literature, such that, as a critic, he can no longer be deemed secondary, but becomes smarter and stronger than the authors he studies as he marks the ultimate fate of their work. This brand of theory is obviously important to Frank then not for what it may *contribute* to the realm of ideas, but for what it takes away. It is important for what it destroys, and further, for what it helps him to destroy, providing an outlet for his aggressive nature. Grudin thus pretty clearly suggests that theorists are marked most notably not for their love, or even respect, for literature, but by their suspicion, aversion and/or even contempt for it. Thus, their study of literature is not one that attempts to investigate or consider works of art, but instead, serves more simply as a vehicle for self-aggrandizement and the assertion of personal control.

This perceived antagonism, of course, translates from the works to the authors of literature, and, as an extension of his resuscitating interest in theory, Frank is similarly "saved" by finding a "phobic scapegoat" (Grudin 119) in the creative writer, Adam Snell. Frank thinks of Adam as "an academic fossil, a closet reactionary" (Grudin 120) or, in a telling string of accusations, as "coily superior...super-creative...foolish...whore-loving humanistic [and] antitheoretical" (Grudin 42). Adam, and his book, become for Frank an epitomization of all that Frank rejects in his rejection of literature, and the coincidence of his brother's artistic sensibilities and "arrogant fault-finding" (Grudin 116) find their correlative, in Frank's mind, in Adam's book:

The book's abundant creativity, its thunderous *joie de vivre*, its endorsement of male-female intimacy, its encomium for the heroic individual were all reminiscent of Gerald; and the book's arrogance, its ironic mockery, its implied disapproval of the entire branch of scholarship that Frank belonged to, were like Gerald reborn. (Grudin 120)

It is Frank's response to the book itself that is important here as neither Adam nor his book, at this point, have enjoyed any public or institutional success. Frank's aggression is not disarmed by the book's ostensible failure, for, as an individual expression and work of art, the book has obviously succeeded in that it operates as a challenge to Frank's assumptions that literature "[has] no implicit human meaning" (Grudin 119) precisely because it is so successful in advancing Snell's humanistic values. This is a challenge that Frank, in his present state of mind, can obviously not tolerate or afford, and he meets this challenge by deciding to assume, and dramatically pursue, the aggressive stance preached to him by literary theory a stance that depicts the theorist as "a commandant, an avenger" (Grudin 119).<sup>17</sup> Frank decides to "murder" Adam Snell's book and, eventually, Adam Snell himself. First, to demonstrate his contempt, Frank buys up the entire remaindered first run of Adam's book and places it to rot in a mouldering pile in the forest by the

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<sup>17</sup> The violent mood created by some theorists is noted by many critics in their assessment of deconstructive writing. For example, M.H. Abrams notes

Especially pervasive are the figures of violence and murderous conflict that, to the startled traditional reader, make the field of language and discourse seem a killing field... In Derrida's formulations, language is structured by violence throughout. The very fact of naming "is the ordinary violence of language," revealing that self-presence is "always already split," while proper names implicate death... Paul de Man explains that "...this can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading or a castration" (*Allegories* 296). (Abrams 21)

These examples, or something similar to them, may presumably have provided some inspiration for Grudin's portrayal of Frank, although, as it is often commented, even the term "deconstruction" itself implies a violence consistent with what Grudin terms Frank's "private compulsions" (119).



school, using it occasionally as toilet-paper. It is, at first, accidental that this contempt extends to Adam personally, but after Frank bludgeons Adam (who happens upon Frank's attempt to steal the personal copies of *Sovrana Sostrata* Adam keeps in his office), he leaves him in the forest alongside the pile in order to demonstrate to the, presumably dying, author the "ultimate meaning" of his book as determined by the victorious theorist.

Clearly, Frank's actions here take the dictates of any theory to an appalling extreme, but Grudin suggests that, though it may be appalling, it is not illogical. His depictions of the other theorists in Snell's department unfailingly demonstrate the kind of hostility toward literature and contempt for the creative writer that is seen to be, in fact, consistent with Frank's psychotic extreme.<sup>18</sup> Glanda Gazza, for example, as the head of the department, is driven by an ambition so fierce it has, in her, "attained the purity of an ideal" (Grudin 64), and her

...medium for satisfying this ambition was a rich grammar of behaviour and discourse, ranging from brutal intimidation, barefaced lying or headlong sexual assault to virtuoso legerdemain with academic jargon, bureaucratic mystery and New Age incantation. These arts and crafts had

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<sup>18</sup> Grudin makes this point abundantly clear to his reader when, at one point, Adam thinks to himself, The cliché is that [theorists] *hate creative writers* and want to supplant them in the literary power structure but I think more profoundly it's because *Sovrana* symbolized sincerity and open expression and fulfilling experience; and most theorists seem congenitally alien to all these things. (Grudin 195)

This, I think, is an example of the failing in Grudin's approach in specific contrast to Bradbury's. While both of their positions are similarly extreme, the fact that Bradbury's criticism of theory takes place primarily on the level of theoretical principle allows him to make many amusing asides and comic reversals that deconstructionists themselves might find witty and entertaining. Grudin, however, with his social criticism opens himself up to the charge of witless exaggeration. That is, while Grudin's suggestion that Frank's disrespect for literature draws him to deconstructive theory may conceivably suggest the problematic nature of its basic tenets, the suggestion made by Adam (a singularly heroic figure) that theorists are "congenitally alien" to sincerity, expression or fulfillment suggests only that Grudin is

brought Gazza uncommon success. She had forged a strong reputation for herself as a literary theorist and managed, over her five-year tenure as chair, to populate her department with many others of her ilk. (Grudin 64)

Like Frank, Gazza gravitates to literary theory in answer to a personal fixation that demonstrates both her moral bankruptcy and a total lack of academic principle. She uses theory as a vehicle toward power and, importantly, it serves her.

In Adam Snell's post-tenure review (which Gazza insists on holding even after Adam's disappearance), she demonstrates, with her like-minded colleagues, the degree to which her theoretical positions are actually determined by a desire to wield incontestable power, rather than a desire to investigate by way of theoretical principle. The majority<sup>19</sup> of the theoretical positions advanced in the meeting condemn Adam's text (and thereby advance a negative evaluation of his performance since tenure), ostensibly, as the text does not conform to the standards dictated by their pet theories. But, in doing so, Grudin is careful to demonstrate that the theorists' adherence to their theories is essentially hypocritical. Each theorist who condemns Adam's book uses his/her theory to make a claim to power, and, in each case, the claim to power finally overwhelms even the theoretical principle upon which s/he stands. For example, the deconstructionist,

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exercising his antagonism rather than forwarding his critique, a charge that ironically allies his motivations with Frank's.

<sup>19</sup> There is one exception. An older feminist, Jane Wallace, takes issues with her fellow feminist, E.F. Taupe's assessment of Adam's text as "*a rapist book*" (Grudin 70). Her response is notably less emotional, and more informed. But, she is interrupted by Taupe who voices her feeling that Jane has betrayed their mutual cause by objecting. Jane is then reminded by Gazza that as a professor emerita she will not be allowed to vote. These interruptions occur just as Jane is recounting a time when "Simone de Beauvoir once told me herself that if only--" (Grudin 89), --a subject that would presumably be of great interest to scholars, particularly feminist scholars, but instead is deemed unworthy of interest as it does not serve their immediate cause. Grudin thereby establishes the merit of the original feminist cause that he suggests has since been bastardized by political posturing, posturing that makes use of its moral and past intellectual integrity to silence opposition rather than to enlighten.

Emerson Baismacou, decries Adam's text because examination of the name, Sovrana Sostrata (initials S.S.), uncovers "evidence" of what he determines is "some Nazi wistfulness," "an idiomatic badge of spiritual deflation" (Grudin 68) and "a hangover from an old conservative, exclusionist order" (Grudin 69). The deconstructionist's argumentation style is ostentatious and ironic; he determines Adam has made "meta-poopoo in his meta-panties" (Grudin 68), and his derisive tone is clearly meant to be persuasive. However, while his analysis relies on the fact that Adam was not in control of his text and that underlying his "humanistic aplomb" and "bright hatchings of literary intention" (Grudin 68) are subversive elements, he allows no such subversive elements to be attached to his own text, arguing that his file advances a negative evaluation of Adam's performance since tenure, and "allows of no other interpretation" (Grudin 69). Thus, Baismacou uses deconstructive principle to introduce negative and objectionable elements into Adam's text on the strength of Sovrana's initials (demonstrating that Adam does not have control of the meaning in his text) and thereby excuses himself from having to advance textual evidence to uphold his interpretation. (Instead, he upholds his absolute objection to Adam's text, by paralleling it to an objection to Nazism.) But, he also, paradoxically, claims an absolute authority in his own writing. This demonstrates that the deconstructionist's interest in the instability of meaning is only applicable as it conveys power, since it is summarily dismissed once it qualifies that power. Similarly, the feminist, E. F. Taupe, who feels "raped" by Adam's text, objects to the interjection of her fellow feminist as a betrayal to The Cause, because the objection fails to uphold her own interpretation. Thus, she feels betrayed by an intellectual and considered objection, according to her "feminist" principle that relies on sisterly solidarity, but perceives no

betrayal in her own immediate, emotional and ill-considered rejection of her fellow feminist's alternate point of view. So Taupe believes in feminism to the extent that it serves her own interests, and is useful to her as a vehicle for a presumably unquestioned right to power. But, an unquestioned right to power is what feminists initially sought to challenge, not gain.

The evident self-serving natures of these theorists' positions cause the footnotes to unite in protest. Grudin introduces footnotes into his text here to represent the supposedly academic nature of the attacks on Adam and his book, but he uses them ironically as they are traditionally meant to be tools for "objective" scholarship. Because of this standard of objectivity (and once infused with enough personality and will by their author), the footnotes protest against the lack of academic principle demonstrated by the theorists and attempt to balance what has become unapologetically biased "self-aggrandizement and character assassination" (Grudin 71). The footnotes attempt to gain some measure of "propriety" (Grudin 70) in this academic setting by enforcing their own will in protest. Hence, footnote "9" objects:

This sort of behaviour jargonizes and ideologizes language to satisfy political interest and indulge personal neurosis, until language no longer makes sense. And if language loses its openness, its potential for impartiality, then culture will rot from within. (Grudin 70)

The footnotes' "sense of justice" is offended by the obfuscation of theoretical jargon, for they suggest that the desire to uphold the lack of referentiality in language and the power bias behind notions of truth or objectivity operates most notably as a *carte blanche* to theorists who wish to advance their subjective responses without the imposed limitations

of impartiality or evidence. As such, many of the theorists freely confess that they have failed to finish reading Adam's book without allowing that to qualify their whole-hearted condemnation of it.

Glanda Gazza similarly demonstrates a hypocritical attachment to theoretical principle as she uses the rhetoric of left-wing theoretical ideology in order to selfishly advance her own cause. Her objection to Adam's book is revealing. She states

As we all know, truly subversive, destabilizing works cannot take the tragic form, for tragedy is no more than the power structure's way of defusing intellectual ferment and popular resentment via scapegoating and catharsis. Sovrana's presence in tragic form thus disenfranchises her as a subversive voice, marginalizing her as a destabilizing agent. She loses her difference, her otherness. (Grudin 77)

Gazza's reliance on what she affirms "we all know" in this statement entirely undercuts its sense. For Adam's use of the tragic form is "truly subversive," *because* it relies on a form so widely criticized and routinely dismissed. As theory has assumed a central place in the academy, it has lost its claim to being a "subversive" force because, as Gazza's role as head of the department suggests, it presently *dictates* the standard of discourse. Thus, being subversive in the present day academy, and certainly in Grudin's University of Washagon English department, is more properly accomplished by using the exploded, traditional form of tragedy than it could be by conforming to the much-lauded and currently fashionable postmodern techniques. This point is emphasized when Gazza attempts to undercut Sovrana's authority as a destabilizing agent, because she is requiring that, as a subversive, Sovrana be located in the "centre" of the interests and modes of the

current "subversive" discourse. While Gazza's position here fails to make much sense in its own right, it is further undermined by the fact that the theoretical beliefs, to which she so vocally lays claim, popularly insist that there is no centre and attempt to bring the voices of the disenfranchised and marginalized forward to be heard. But since, in Gazza's department, the old-school, traditional centre represents the now marginalized, this original project is distorted, as Gazza and her cohorts attempt to hang onto the power they gained by upsetting the old paradigms. They, thereby, reveal themselves to be, not revolutionaries (despite their rhetoric), but shrewd manipulators.

Thus, when Gazza is accused of stacking Adam's committee against him with "those theorists who would [be] most likely to view [his case] most negatively" (Grudin 88), she responds with all the outrage of her assumed unimpeachable authority:

How could you or anyone believe that I or this department could do such a thing? Do you know where you are? Our national Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of speech. On top of this our university, like hundreds of similar institutions, maintains strict standards of academic freedom. Thirdly, the vast majority of our department is composed of specialists in relatively new disciplines, all of which owe much of their philosophy to the influence of the American and European Left...and hence would be automatically anti-establishment and pro-freedom of expression...it's just outrageous to imply that we're intolerant. Indeed, I think most of my colleagues will join me in suggesting that it bespeaks in you *precisely those ideologically limited attitudes which, [are] suggested in Snell's book...* (Grudin 89-90)

Gazza is relying on the fact that, because one *must* assume that she is "automatically anti-establishment and pro-freedom of expression," she cannot, categorically, be accused of anything else. She relies on the political viability of her stated beliefs to operate as an impenetrable shield, behind which she cannot be questioned or challenged. Thus, her theoretical stance operates as a preemptive strike against the possibility of discussion as even the slightest quibble can be accused of ideological limitation. This effectively throws the discussion hopelessly off-track as one cannot penetrate to Gazza's methods through the camouflage of her stated politics.<sup>20</sup> Thus, theory theorizes itself into an unimpeachable state, which is doubly ironic since its originating claim was to investigate instead "those tranquil assurances in whose name so many moralisms... organize their courts, their trials and their censures" (Derrida, "Canons" 202). But Grudin, like Bradbury, levels the challenge against theorists who turn to this questing, destabilizing rhetoric only as it satisfies their will, abandoning it just at the point it becomes most important.

It is a key feature of Grudin's criticism, however, that the theorists he depicts are not wholly responsible for their guile. He makes it clear that the institution as a whole is guilty of establishing and reinforcing the division between artist and theorist, and for laying claim to ideologically progressive ideas it betrays in action. Indeed, Gazza's self-defense relies on the spectre of the university as a staunch protector of "the strict standards of academic freedom" (Grudin 89), and is a statement that Grudin seems to

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<sup>20</sup> A similar concern is expressed by critics who worry that it is  
 ...no longer...feasible to weed out the methodologically dubious from the politically  
 progressive. To attack post-structuralism now is to risk being labeled a right-wing

intend to ring a little falsely considering the context in which it is uttered.<sup>21</sup> First of all, the university institutionalizes a basic level of disregard for creative writing by considering it a superfluous accomplishment for a scholar in the English department, a notion that is strangely at odds with the large majority of the society that seems to believe that being able to practice something *qualifies* a person to discuss it. But, in the university, as a footnote explains,

Publications bearing upon tenure and promotion decisions at academic institutions are generally expected to be scholarly and in the field of research that the candidate has chosen as his or her specialty. A candidate's nonscholarly publications are often discounted as specious, amateuristic and/or unserious. (Grudin 66)

This may make sense in the science faculty, where one's abilities as a creative writer do not in any obvious way qualify one to comment on chemical or biological processes, but, in the English department, being able to write literature should, in a viable manner, open up the scholar to certain elements of the process and function of literature as a whole.

The academic's desire to preclude that possibility suggests, perhaps, a desire to gain authority as a specialist over his/her subject. This places the scholar in that strangely antagonistic relationship with his/her subject that, it is clear, theory did not invent, but upon which it has apparently capitalized. Thus, the police lieutenant investigating Adam's disappearance is totally mystified by his case, explaining that it is clear "someone

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ideologue, a foe not of obscurantist logic chopping but of oppressed people everywhere. (Crews 56)



was or is trying to obliterate Adam Snell, possibly as a human being, certainly as a creative voice" (Grudin 85). But even as the lieutenant has found evidence to support this suggestion, he finds it totally confusing, and he asks the professors at Adam's post-tenure review "...who in his right mind would want to murder a book?" (Grudin 87). To the lieutenant, this proposition may seem totally nonsensical, but in the university English department, it becomes immediately and variously applicable, and, while Gazza and company react defensively, Dr. Adler, the "marginalized Shakespearean" (Grudin 67), retorts "You'd be surprised" (Grudin 87), explaining that many members among the present company have expressed motive enough. By privileging theory, the university creates an environment in which a scholar's demonstrated antipathy for his/her subject is considered evidence of an uncompromising intellectualism while demonstrated sympathy is considered indicative of a credulous leniency. This results in an environment in which hostility inevitably thrives.

Thus, the university's privileging of theory-oriented criticism proves the extent to which it has compromised itself in its willingness to cultivate authority *inside* its walls and among its members. Grudin suggests that this has happened at great cost to the university, outside, in society, as the university has largely conceded its ability to operate in a society that is not served by this narrowing of focus and distilling of negative energy. Society at large is not served by learning of the instability of all knowledge, the impossibility of objectivity and the necessarily violent nature of all notions of truth or value. The society is in desperate need of an education that can connect its students with

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<sup>21</sup> That is, in Adam's post-tenure review, where his immediate supervisor has attempted to orchestrate a bid for his seemingly unanimous dismissal, and has been instrumental in creating an environment where his

their past (not encourage them to discount it) and allow them to look forward to a future that has something valuable, and viable, to offer beyond simply congratulation (for the recognition of our uselessness), and perverse encouragement (to revel in the "freedom" provided by the abyss). So, Gazza is finally, and somewhat idealistically, rebuked for her devious manipulation of Adam's post-tenure review and advised to

...look at our society, Professor. We're facing environmental emergency and massive poverty and all sorts of crime. Our products are no longer attracting world attention, and to make things worse our corporations, made for quarterly bottom-line profits, are cutting research-and-development budgets to the bone. If evolutionary success lies in adaptation and development, then we have apparently bought out of evolutionary success. To a large extent I see these selfish and panicky attitudes mirrored in individuals, even college students. How does literary theory speak to these problems? What values does it recommend to students and scholars?...Literary theory...not only has no antidote for these public disorders but would seem in its lack of values--its relativism and materialism--actually to encourage them. My guess is that its manifest lack of social relevance will make your field at best a passing vogue, at worst a tragic institutional blunder. (Grudin 147)

*Book* concludes by righting this over-evaluation of the benefits of literary theory and averting this "tragic institutional blunder" as the novel progresses in its depiction of the university from one extreme, of outraged critique, to another, of utopian vision.

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work and ideas are challenged, not for their lack of merit, but for their lack of fashion consciousness.

Adam Snell is discovered alive; he recovers, and while his book finds a new publisher and kindles renewed interest and respect, he determines the identity of his would-be killer thanks to some good old-fashioned analytical skills (he relies on a basic understanding of characterization). Meanwhile, because of the high-profile nature of his case, a reversal occurs at the University of Washagon. An endowment, made by a sympathetic colleague in the science department, recommends and allows the university to honour Adam Snell and split the English department into "theoretical" and "essentialist" groups. This, it is considered,

will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the humanities faculty and doubtless will be seen as attractive by all concerned [as] The benefits of this realignment are double. First, the Department of English will be restored to strength as a body considering literature itself, and not the theoretical manipulation of literature, the paramount element in an English degree. Second, literary theory's capacity, in and of itself, to edify and empower students will be tested in a fair arena. (Grudin 227)

Not surprisingly, literary theory, once separated from literature, does not survive at the University of Washagon, and "a sudden and unexpected dearth of students [leaves] the theorists with great spans of time on their hands" (Grudin 234). This does not phase the theorists, however, as, Grudin charges, their main concern has never been their students, but their research, which continues now uninterrupted:

Emerson Baismacou was conducting a nonstop seminar on his recently published *Oracle, Orifice* and his soon-to-appear *The Text as Undergarment*. Supported by a massive government grant, E.F. Taupe

was eloquently advancing the thesis that all known forms of heterosexual activity were processible rape, while Sandy Eule was rough-drafting a polemic which asserted that books were not written by people, or, if they were, they were not books...almost from dawn to dusk...they debated intractably subtle distinctions in unintelligibly recondite terminology.

(Grudin 235)

Grudin depicts the theory department as one that welcomes the loss of students as this "loss" allows a further narrowing of focus and appeal. Meanwhile, the theorists' work continues to dramatically debase literature and, in Taupe's case, sexuality, in ways that are importantly disconnected from anything that could be safely termed reality, or, that could be carried out productively in the society at large. This, finally, leads to the realization of the introductory threat made against Adam, and voiced by the provost, J. Thoreau Marshall, who swore to make Adam's life "the closest academic approximation of living hell" (Grudin 11). Adam survives, and even defies, this hell, because he reveres literature and is an important, and finally recognized, literary talent. But in the Department of Literary Theory there remains "a mild sulfuric smell" (Grudin 235), as Grudin depicts an academic hell that perpetuates itself, if only momentarily,<sup>22</sup> by pursuing relentlessly that which it vigorously rejects.

Alternately, a vision of academic heaven is granted at the end of the novel by Sovrana Sostrata, who appears in the final postscript as a goddess figure, granting favour to the "true acolytes," whom she identifies as those "blind to obstacle yet inwardly acute,

alert to no errors save your own, [and who] endur[e] hunger and mockery for the solitary delight of mere perception" (Grudin 250). Sovrana offers these scholars sympathy and recompense, saying,

I have seen your cramped offices and stooping garrets, tasted with you the cheap wine and coarse bread, listened as you strained before drowsy classes to teach the act of thought. *I accept your worship; I grant you favor.* And I shall visit you... sometimes at work, when your mind, twisted and taut as an Ithacan bowstring, relaxes into revelation; sometimes in meditation, when the masks of science fall and give way to a simple reverence... (Grudin 250).

The true scholar offers then this worship, and benediction, struggling for revelation, while performing simple communion in honour of the creative force that Sovrana embodies.

Grudin suggests that the magic of literature both for reader and author has been dishonoured, ravaged, and almost lost by the vagaries of literary theory and he reinstates it with the alluring, elusive figure of Sostrata still finally intangible, but beckoning, at the end of the book.

This element of magic in the book is furthermore devised as a criticism of deconstructive theory and provides the most abstract critique made in, and by, Grudin's book. Here, Grudin challenges the notion of the death of the author by exploring the ineffable mystery of creation. This is initially introduced in the novel when it is made clear that Adam at some psychological and emotional level feels that he has had a love

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<sup>22</sup> The reader is informed in "Postscript 1, by Adam Snell" that the Department of Literary Theory at Washagon is "now-defunct," and refers anyone interested in being reminded "what literary theory was" to

affair with the title character of his book, Sovrana, who speaks to him during the delirium caused by the blow to his head. And, later, Grudin "himself" interrupts the narrative, placing himself, as author, in his text. He begins by answering questions posited by his "readers," who soon challenge a perceptible hesitancy in his answers to their questions. To explain, he confesses,

...you see I'm at a crazily excited period in composition when I'm writing reams a day, and the characters are calling their own shots, and the book is at least temporarily out of control. It's no longer a dead text I'm handling, but rather a self-sustaining ecosystem, an autonomous life form that drinks up my energy each day and leaves me exhausted. I can't take full responsibility, in the normal sense of that word, or fully explain down to the last detail why things are happening as they are. (Grudin 168-9)

This confession plays into the idea, at some level, of the author as "scriptor," but, importantly, the autonomous life of the book does not disinherit the author or divorce him from his text, rather it works in the opposite way to involve him more personally and importantly in the act of creation. So, Grudin explains

I've invented a new concept that I call *extratextuality*, consisting of things readers won't ever know unless they ask the author personally. In fact, I may even put blank pages in the text, so that readers can write questions on them and send them to me. (Grudin 170)

Putting blank pages in the text demonstrates the importance of the communion between author, reader and book as the questions and answers would become a literal part of the

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the "informative if choppy account...in Grudin's book" (Grudin 243).

text that inspires and determines them. Grudin, thereby, challenges the theories that separate the author from the book and the reader from both as he invokes a kind of mystical presence of all three existing simultaneously in the consciousnesses of one another.

The involvement of the author *in* his text becomes literal when the reader is told, in a postscript written by Adam Snell, that Grudin seems to have disappeared into (his) *Book*. Snell explains that "Grudin...[became] obsessed with his work, and...he... appropriated my real-life experiences, together with those of...the brothers Underwood and others, as things psychically his own" (Grudin 246). This author then *is* actually presumed dead, and he apparently has, in fact, disappeared into his text as his pets sleep under his copy of *Book* to be near him. Thus, it is only his text that survives, as his characters make claim to a "real-life" presence and reality that dispossess their author of the authority to lay claim to them. But Grudin at some level is mocking what amounts to theoretical principle by realizing a concept like "the death of the author" and the notion that "there is nothing outside of the text." For, as Bradbury similarly charges, once such theories attempt to find purchase in reality, what results is a sort of fantasy world that is importantly disconnected from the human world. If it is the case that Robert Grudin, author of the novel *Book*, has disappeared into his text while his characters remain to write postscripts, diagnosing his authority as some kind of neurotic presumption, it is now left only for the reader, and the critic, to believe it.

In their novels, Grudin and Bradbury take issue with theoretical principle and they launch disparaging attacks on theorists whom they charge with undermining the value and power of literature and creativity. Deconstructive theory specifically is exposed as a

means for critics to take authority from authors, not as an attempt to question or destabilize that authority, but rather as an attempt to win its privileges for themselves. This attack on authors is posited as a means of undermining the respected position of literature in the university system. This damages not only the status of literature but the status of scholarship, for scholarship (without intention, meaning and the enforced limitations of impartiality, truth and evidence) becomes difficult to pursue and becomes subject to the potentially ruinous vagaries of fashion and politics. Grudin and Bradbury thus emphasize the destructive presence and potentiality of deconstruction and refuse to acknowledge attempts to side-step it. Instead, they insist on a conception of literature as art: art that presupposes both expression and intent while it communicates reliably the concepts of value and of truth.



## Chapter Four -- the Creative Critic and the Creative Artist

As the debate over theory exemplified in the previous chapter, the relationship between the scholar and the artist is a problematic one. The artist occupies an essentially contradictory role in relation to the scholar, as both the scholar's subject and his/her source. This contradiction requires the scholar, in turn, to occupy what (to some degree at least) must be concurrently a dominant (or, at least, comparatively independent) *and* a subordinate (or dependent) position relative to the artist. With the artist as subject, the critic must assume a relatively objective and dominant position in order to make critical pronouncements on the artist's work, while, with the artist as source, the scholar must acknowledge a primacy in the artistic product.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Bradbury and Grudin target theory as an attempt by scholars to deal with this contradiction in the scholar/artist relationship by denying the artist the primacy implied by his/her work as a source. In their novels, the death of the author becomes a particular bone of contention, as does the attack on meaning, because both theories make the scholar more *necessary*, while simultaneously rendering the artist's work more accidental and/or incidental. This can be recognized as an attempt on the part of the scholars to resolve the subject-source conflict by declaring the balance of power to lie more definitively with them, as agents of a more sophisticated understanding and awareness. Meanwhile, Bradbury and Grudin's novels challenge these theories and attempt to reassert the balance of power back in their own direction (as artists). They declare instead the primacy and final authority of art as the source and not simply the subject of critical study.

It becomes clear in these terms that theory has operated in some senses as a weapon in a much larger and perhaps more fundamental conflict inherent in the scholar/artist relationship. Indeed, the larger implications and the more essential operations of this basic conflict are significantly revealing. Both Michael Frayn, in *The Trick of It*, and Carol Shields, in *Swann*, depict characters grappling with the warring impulses of the scholar in apprehension of his subject/source, while exploring the various attempts made by their characters to strike some kind of proper balance in regard to this relationship, both in terms of their scholarship and in terms of their individual lives.<sup>1</sup>

Frayn and Shields penetrate into the psychological, emotional and elemental spaces of their characters in order to determine the reasons for and consequences of this conflicted relationship.<sup>2</sup> Their examinations reveal the degree to which the very nature of criticism is complicated by an unequal distribution of power. The university is targeted as it fosters, rather than answers to, this imbalance by demanding the conviction and authority of experts from people who have declared themselves in the service of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> These novels are important, therefore, as this issue contextualizes all those in the previous three chapters. Power struggles, whether internal competitions, or external conflicts, whether between scholars, between scholars and bureaucrats or between authors and

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<sup>1</sup> Frayn's depiction is by far the longer as his entire novel is focused on these impulses in his protagonist. Shields devotes only one out of five major sections to this issue in her novel as only one out of four of her major characters displays these characteristics. My study of the novels reflects this discrepancy as a focused reading of Frayn's novel yields more than does one of Shields'.

<sup>2</sup> As such, there will be no attempt in this chapter to further contextualize these novels in relation to the non-fiction, scholarly writing on the university. While books about the current state of the university often consider the relative merits of different *types* of criticism, it moves beyond their direct purpose to investigate the nature of criticism itself. This chapter, taking its cue from the university novels, therefore, stands as a further investigation, and perhaps a contextualization, of the basic concerns expressed by the critics at the beginning of Chapter Three. That is, rather than existing *outside* the scope of the non-fiction written on the university, these novels pursue the next level *inside* that larger debate.

theorists, are here shown to be inescapable as they penetrate to the very core of the scholar-artist relationship. This revelation further charges the university, rather than excusing it, to address this imbalance in a constructive way. Bitter competition, bureaucratic intervention and theoretical sophistication suggest that academics are not dealing with this power imbalance in a way that fosters self-awareness. Instead, they are perpetuating the paradox of hoping to avoid the full implications of a service for which they volunteer.

As a reflection of the power politics that fuel the theory debate specifically, Richard Dunnett, the protagonist of Frayn's *The Trick of It*, is characterized as a critic who "lean[s] a little toward the deconstructionist at times" (Frayn 78). Working at a small university in Britain, he has forged his critical reputation as an expert on the novels of a writer he refers to simply as "JL." The fact that he fails to name her any more fully is indicative of Richard's often overwhelming desire to both demonstrate and secure his authoritative knowledge, and her initials operate for him as a sort of insider's code since they basically require his presence as context in order to mean what they apparently do (that is, he, as an expert on JL's novels, would hardly need to explain which JL he means when he refers to her, although presumably, someone else, a non-expert, would need to distinguish more fully this specific "JL" from all the others in the world at large). His use of her initials, rather than her proper name, functions then to make Richard necessary to his subject, just as it tends to avoid that subject's more specific personhood. But it is this personhood that Richard is ultimately forced to confront, as the novel relates his meeting,

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<sup>3</sup> I am using the term service here to imply subordination and the term knowledge to suggest something that is unending, that cannot be finally known because it is not finite.

bedding, wedding, troubled marriage and finally more troubling estrangement from JL, in the form of a series of letters written to a friend and colleague in Australia. It is through Richard's involvement with the subject and source of his studies that Frayn explores the relationship between scholar and artist and exposes both the presumptions and insecurities of the scholar, as Richard's personal confidence and professional conceit are slowly eroded by his increasing exposure to the artist and the ineffable mystery of her art. My discussion of the novel tracks Richard's development from a confident, domineering critic to a timid, self-effacing scholar, from the neurotic extremes of full empowerment to abject powerlessness. To start, this requires a careful exploration of Richard's initial characterization as Frayn exposes the basic conflict that motivates his character in these extremes throughout the novel.

In the beginning, Richard is brash and knowing, and his confidence is specifically located in his professional, critical arrogance. The book opens with his triumphant declaration: "she's coming" (Frayn 5). Knowing that JL herself prefers to write by hand, Richard successfully attracts her attention by writing her a personal note asking "...could my students talk to *her*? Adding how her book had made them question some of their most fundamental whichwhats and indeed set off the most extraordinary ferment of intellectual whatever" (Frayn 5). The self-congratulation evident in Richard's tone here is clearly linked to the satisfaction and pride he takes in his knowing manipulation of the writer. He consciously makes use of his knowledge of her predilections toward the personal and flatters her breezily. The fact that "his" writer is seduced by this studied manipulation, and seduced adequately that no matter why *she* thinks she's coming "it'll end up with her talking to them, naturally" (Frayn 5), shows that Richard enjoys this

sense of superiority. Indeed, he takes great pleasure in knowing everything there is to know about JL and congratulates himself that he has her "complete biography in [his] brain" (Frayn 5). This is clearly linked to Richard's desire to take control of his subject, to prove himself as an authority, and thereby maintain a certain dominance in his status as a scholar. His desire to claim complete and total knowledge makes the idea of further real-life experience therefore unsettling to him, and the opportunity of meeting JL, despite the self-satisfying way he manages to arrange it, causes a certain reluctance in Richard.

He admits

...there's going to be nothing but disappointment in meeting someone you know everything about already. There's something I don't know? Then I know where to look it up. I know her mind and I know her heart, and I know them backwards, forwards and sideways. I know them better than she knows them herself. (Frayn 8)

Here, Richard reveals his reluctance to share personal authority over the artist even with the artist herself. To Richard, "JL" is not a person first, but a biography, a writer, a subject of study, and thus he can know her better, as subject, than she does herself.

Indeed, meeting her threatens to upend this practiced balance and Richard begins to worry that seeing JL "in all her circumstantiality...will destroy the magic" (Frayn 7). He wants to "take the opportunity to try out my theories," but wonders if it will "take all the fun out of my researches" (Frayn 6). Though he refers to his desire to guard "the magic" and "the fun" of research here, it is *so* clear that Richard wants to protect his authority that these terms could be seen as euphemisms for, or perhaps even as descriptions of, that authority (thus standing as further evidence of his regard for it). In

any case, it is as a critic that Richard is actually shrinking from the necessity and the immediacy of JL "in the flesh," because, it seems, he fears her in the full evidence of her independent personhood. For once he meets and is forced to recognize her as a person, JL may disprove the inviolability of the bare facts of her biography, facts upon which he categorically depends. And, if he asks her about his theories, he will be giving her authority over his research either to prove or disprove them. Richard repudiates this kind of obsequious stance and stands for a criticism (consistent with his self-confessed deconstructive tendencies) that demands for an authority independent of the author. He mocks his "fellow-specialists. Comrades in arms... Vlad the Impaler... and... that creepy little woman from somewhere in Pennsylvania who can't spell heuristic, Dr Stoff, or Swoff"<sup>4</sup> for being the kind of critics to ingratiate themselves into an artist's life, and congratulates himself, in contrast, stating that he "always thought we in Britain were above such things" (Frayn 7). He immediately amends this statement, maintaining defensively that actually "[he] never thought anything at all. The idea of trying to scrape an acquaintance with her has never crossed my mind" (Frayn 7). The verb "scrape" and the diminutive status of an "acquaintance" make it clear why Richard would so emphatically reject such a position in the relationship with "his" writer, and it becomes obvious to the reader that Richard's anxiety is specifically defensive in nature. As such, he worries (somewhat melodramatically) if upon shaking her hand, he will "feel not the virtue in her flowing into me, but the virtue in me leaking away into her!" (Frayn 7). Though somewhat sensationalized for effect, this anxiety is a real one for Richard,

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<sup>4</sup> At one point Richard identifies this "name" as an acronym for "the Society for the Propagation of Feminist Fiction" (Frayn 119); he delights in always getting it wrong.

because he recognizes that his "virtue" resides in his professional distance, and his disdain for a supplicating role. He fears this will be compromised if he is forced to contend with JL as a person, for, as he says, "we're not into flesh, in our trade" (Frayn 7). "Flesh," in fact, stands as a certain danger, since it demands a reality that must necessarily compromise Richard's breezy arrogance that he knows JL better than she could herself, an assertion he links importantly to the thoroughness and reliability of his professional study.

With this anxiety uppermost in his mind, JL's visit turns out to be, initially, a triumph for Richard, and his next letter begins with an eager report on "the visitation from the subject of my studies." This appellation for JL demonstrates his joy in discovering what is his "first thing to report: she is *absolutely ordinary*" (Frayn 11), and emphasizes that the power arrangement Richard was so anxious to protect has, in fact, survived the writer's first appearance. Richard determines JL's ordinariness, at first, because she does not immediately command his awed respect and thereby upset his sense of himself in relation to her. Instead, as he explains to his friend, "were you to introduce her to your genteel but semi-literate family, or I to my semi-genteel and quarter-literate one, they would not raise an eyebrow" (Frayn 11). Thus, first (and most importantly as far as Richard is concerned) what he discovers about JL, the writer in person, is that she is no better than they are, the scholars.

Richard is therefore even more pleased by JL's subsequent performance in his classroom, and he reports to his friend,

what she said about [books] had a wonderful dullness and brownness, like the linoleum in some old-fashioned public library. She said it was important to make the reader feel at home in a book. She said she had

found it was no good trying to write about characters she didn't respect.

You should allow yourself no more than one major and one minor coincidence per book. Etcetera. If the Faculty Board had heard such things on my lips I should certainly find myself looking for other employment in the coming academic year, probably as an encyclopaedia salesman. (Frayn 11-2)

JL's knowledge about books is specifically set in contrast to Richard's more theoretically sophisticated, cutting-edge and professional knowledge and he is clearly pleased to ally her and her ideas with the "old-fashioned public library," because it proves that she does not, in fact, impinge upon his space. Her knowledge is pedestrian, and, as the linoleum suggests, almost domestic in its matter-of-fact predictability. Most importantly, JL's ideas about books would not, could not, make the grade in the university, which sets "higher" standards for its faculty. As a member of this elite group, Richard imagines instead that the quality of these ideas would relegate him immediately to the lowly status of an encyclopaedia salesman, a telling image that effectively equates JL's creative standards and sensibilities with door-to-door commonality rather than rarefied intellect. This image suggests that Richard finds her ideas to be almost thoughtless in their eager simplicity, and he consequently assigns her to the position of something (or someone) who provides worn truths without the strictures of real intelligence. JL, by Richard's perception of the dubious intellectual merit of her ideas, is reduced therefore to the status of mere *reference* material, rather than the more important and vital status of *source* material, which, of course, affirms Richard's higher intellectual status over her. As a result, he very consciously takes control of the class, and (as he seems to believe) of her,



by allowing himself to be "charmed" by these outmoded sensibilities, rather than disappointed, and he begins asking her questions that, he suggests, belie his much more sophisticated literary sense in order to cater to her as his guest. He seems to credit this hospitable gesture to his restraint and maturity, but it springs much more probably from his actual *relief* at her inability to really impress him. He feared his confidence would be compromised in her presence, but instead she remains safely inside the scope of his responsibility, as *his* writer, in *his* classroom.

So assured, Richard is able to relax and revel in JL's presence and this makes him ultimately vulnerable to the real nature of JL's charm, and he is slowly won over by her. Significantly, this happens after the intellectual test is over and the classroom gives way to more social spaces less strictly defined by or dependent upon the work of the university. Thus, it is at dinner that Richard finds himself marveling at "this *woman*, sitting with such modest dignity amidst my students and colleagues, talking to the former about how to find a good literary agent, and to the latter about gardening and cats," confessing it "touched my heart most strangely" (Frayn 14). Richard is taken off guard. In the classroom, JL "didn't want to talk about books...and when forced to by some of my more obstreperous over-achievers, she seemed slightly perplexed" (Frayn 11), but in a more social setting, she demonstrates ability and confidence. This pleases him because he does not seem to recognize this atmosphere as one that could be potentially threatening to his authority. Instead, still lulled by his evident relief at the ordinariness of this literary giant, he sits with her at dinner "in silence like a proud owner, watching everyone else...tiptoe[] admiringly around her" (Frayn 15). Richard still feels himself to be JL's "owner" as the expert on her work, the man to be credited for her visit, and in charge of

her for its duration, and he basks in the reflected glory that her presence occasions, allowing it to credit him in the same way that her books credit her. Richard believes that he is the author of this event, even the author of JL, and as such he is able to congratulate himself for every redeeming feature of hers.

Of course, this desire to see himself as JL's "owner" also betrays a certain level of insecurity as, really, just a scholar on her works, and even from the beginning Richard's brash egoism is balanced by an unevenly repressed self-doubt. This self-doubt is more successfully subdued in the opening pages of the novel, when he is still secure in the safe confines of the university, where his professional conceit can remain protected, and indeed can be encouraged by the like-minded pseudo-presence of colleagues such as the friend to whom Richard's letters are addressed. But, the very fact of Richard's desire to prove himself in some way superior suggests a lurking suspicion that he is perhaps less than that, and, after succeeding in persuading JL to attend his class, he admits, "I can't help asking myself why? Why is she coming? What's in it for her?" (Frayn 5). He imagines her visit as a sort of chore, admitting that it is more consistent with what he terms the demands of "our dreary trade" (Frayn 6), suggesting that at a significant level he concedes the greatness of JL's creativity in that it should have adequately excused her from taking on such dreariness. But there still is, at this point, the suggestion of self-congratulation in this confession, and Frayn depicts the interplay between self-conscious insecurity and blustering self-confidence masterfully, as Richard counters this confession with the sense that the dreariness of his profession makes him nobler for its exacting demands. He writes with mock incredulity,

Because that's what these people do. Did you know that? They make things up. Off the top of their heads... And then honest working folks like us, in our great concrete knowledge factories, have to *report*, have to *learn*, have to *know*, have to *expound* these shrugged-off nothingnesses.

Ain't it all a blooming shame? (Frayn 9)

Richard places writers and the stuff they make up against the honest work he does, thereby setting up a dichotomy between the relative ease of producing "nothingnesses" as a creative writer (without real limits or demands), and the real and necessary discipline of the critic. His tone here, as he presents obvious fact as revelation ("Did you know that?"), further emphasizes his self-congratulation, and his apparent surprise that "these people" should have it so easy. Nonetheless, his stance is also obviously defensive, and the self-deprecating element of this image of the scholar seems, in fact, to belie his deeper insecurities. This insecurity becomes most evident when Richard reveals what remains throughout the book to be an obsession with his own mortality, and his desire to offset that mortality by *creating* something capable of making his name, and lasting beyond his death. Repeatedly, he asks his friend to reassure him of the importance of his writing through the writing in his letters, inquiring

You are keeping these letters, aren't you? You are storing them in steel filing-cabinets guaranteed proof against white ants and bush fires? They may, in years to come, turn out to constitute my entire literary remains; they may prove to be the text of my long-awaited *JL: A Critical Study*.

(Frayn 10)

Clearly, Richard has fantasies of conferring on himself the kind of immortality JL's novels promise to assure her, and he imagines his own letters being worthy of the same kind of scholarly attention that would establish his importance to the (literate) world at large in the same way that he now establishes JL's. And while it is true that Richard is probably being slightly facetious here, the regularity with which he fears "white ants and bush fires," or otherwise refers to his "*Collected Correspondence*" (Frayn 13), suggests that this "joke" is actually evidence of a deep-seated desire to imagine himself in the same way capable of, not only producing lasting and important work, but, creating "literary" remains.

This covert desire becomes more available to both Richard and the reader after he meets JL and, disarmed by her apparent ordinariness, is ultimately won over by what he discovers to be her exceptional qualities. As the influence of his success in the classroom begins to wear off, and he becomes socially, and emotionally, more interested in JL, he begins to realize what was not immediately, physically, obvious to him at the start. Amending his earlier assessment, he remarks "Did I say earlier that she was *ordinary*? I see...that I did. *Absolutely* ordinary was the phrase I used. Let me modify this a little. She is *absolutely extraordinary*" (Frayn 13). What makes her so extraordinary suddenly is the combination of her apparent ordinariness, and thus her accessibility, and her confidence, her ability to be graceful and pleasing in a situation that he feared was going to be uncomfortable and dissatisfying. For this grace of presence, he compares her to the Queen, writing,

She has that same maddening air of being quietly and unshakeably right, of being absolutely who she is, and of considering this an entirely

sufficient explanation for her presence in the world. She is *our* Queen --  
by the Grace of God Defender of Fiction, Empress of Character and  
Sovereign of the Blessed Plot. (Frayn 13)

This is a typical example of what Frayn does so well in this novel as he is able to make Richard communicate what Richard himself does not yet seem to fully understand. As an example, the mockingly overblown nature of this statement suggests a stubborn resistance to what, as a scholar, Richard is unwillingly beginning to suspect. Despite (what he perceives as) the more exacting rigours and demands of his education and trade, Richard is beginning to see that JL, as an author of fiction, is capable of being who she is without apology or amendment by a sort of divine right. This is because she is a source (of fiction), and thus is not required to place herself in relation to anyone or anything else, and thereby "justify her presence" in the same way that the critic necessarily must, by virtue of coming second, and therefore, in some senses, being secondary. His language mimics that of divine, and therefore universal, decree (or at least university decree) and demonstrates what he perceives as the immutability of JL's claim to primacy. In contrast to her, he obviously continues to feel pressure to defend himself, to justify himself, which thus implies that he is not absolutely who *he* is, and does not consider *himself* "entirely sufficient explanation" for his presence in the world. Instead, he is who he is *in relation* to her, either as her critic, her host or her owner, and thus will always fail to supersede her.

Although Richard does not fully pursue all these implications, or seem to become immediately aware of them, Frayn suggests that he has some intimation of them for Richard's attitude from this point onward begins to shift significantly as he pursues some

rather wild attempts to avoid what he here seems to suspect. Immediately, for example, he abandons his scholarly attitude and begins to compromise his professional distance in an attempt to redefine his relationship to JL on a more emotional level. He starts telling her about his childhood and family, and this more personal interaction initiates new fantasies and opens up new possibilities for Richard as he begins to imagine for himself something potentially greater than a mere professional involvement with his subject. He writes

I can think of no happier fate than to be lured in through those ever-open [eyes], taken to pieces inside that well-concealed brain, cleaned up, re-designed, made credible, given a function in some properly organized plot, and then reborn through those motherly fingers; to become ink (blue, Swan) emerging from the nib (gold, 18-carat) of her pen (black, Waterman's); and to be laid out (on the luxurious hundred-gram Conqueror bond she always uses) beneath the eyes of all literate mankind and eternity. You see what I mean about her being the Queen. (Frayn 14)

Richard wants a more immediate involvement with JL than his scholarly commitment to her work allows. The nature of the commitment he imagines instead demonstrates the degree to which he has, perhaps been, and certainly become, frustrated with his place in their relationship as scholar and artist. But, rather than confront the full implications of his supplementary status, Richard attempts to evade them, and he performs a feat of avoidance by seizing on this imagined "no happier fate." With this fate, Richard effectively rejects his principal role as a critic of JL's work and begins to imagine, and strive toward, *becoming* JL's work. Richard imagines becoming a subject of his own, and

most importantly, *her* subject, thereby reversing the imbalance of power between them. Thus, although Richard's imaginary casting of JL as "the Queen" may have originated as an aggrandizement of all that she embodies to him, it is immediately transformed into a significant recasting of *himself* as her subject. (This is suggested by his qualification in the above passage "you see what I mean," which, I would argue, suggests that he is attempting to control the meaning and thus the implications of his depiction of her as queen.) Ironically, and obviously hopelessly, Richard is attempting to use his role as subject to save him from becoming "subjected," to actually distance him from the full implications of her sovereignty. He takes its significance from the dominance it might provide him to be *her* source *before* she becomes his. This fantasy of becoming a source for JL instantly overwhelms any desire Richard has to deal with JL as *his* subject/source, and he imagines his friend's "professional surprise that I was telling her all about *my* mother and aunts when I should have been asking her about *hers*, not to mention [her books]" (Frayn 15). Richard has abandoned his scholarly interest in JL and his remark about her "well-concealed brain" shows that he has given up on his earlier declaration that he knows her better than she knows herself, probably because his professional conceit is no longer necessary to his imagined relationship with her. Richard sees the opportunity to become something much more important to JL, *and* to all of literate mankind, than simply a critic of JL's work, and he imagines, as her subject, that he will be given "a function" for all eternity. This ambition reveals the degree to which Richard covets the importance and immortality granted the authors of great literature, and his knowledge of the biographical details of the type of ink, pen and paper JL uses is this time demonstrated as a kind of fetishist compulsion to be intimately involved with his object of interest.

These burgeoning desires of course are not simply evolutions of Richard's involvement with JL, but they stand in direct contradiction to his interests as a scholar, and this conflict results in one of the most humorous scenarios in the book (and an example of Frayn's absolutely delightful, yet still perfectly controlled, sense of the ridiculous). When Richard admits to his friend that he and the subject of his studies have had sex, it is an occasion that results in a shock of almost mind-blowing proportion for Richard, who relates that he has "discovered a new taboo governing mankind...a taboo against intercourse with an author on your own reading-list... (Frayn 25). This is troubling for Richard because it creates further conflict between his growing personal interest in JL and his professional interest in her. He laments

One's sense of outraging a divine sanction is made more acute...because one's desire contains an element of frankly professional interest.

Unwrapping this particular parcel is what one is paid to do, after all.

Patiently, over long years, using nothing but one's native intelligence and sensibility, plus a set of pink file cards and a little Olympia portable...

Now, suddenly, one has only to undo a button here and a hook there, and gently slide back the innermost wrapping to get to the very heart of the mystery, to discover things that one never guessed one would know in one's lifetime. (Frayn 26)

It is interesting to see here that Richard is most overwhelmed by the feeling that he might be cheating. The work that in the past has required his intelligence and office paraphernalia is now overshadowed by what is both so much easier and so much more potentially rewarding. It is only a button or a hook that prevents his access to "the very



heart of the mystery," and Richard cannot help but think that he has triumphed over his fellow JL scholars. This triumph somewhat offsets the fact that this is what he is "paid to do," a detail that allows him to think that he has, at some level, prostituted himself for access to this mystery. But no matter the manner of his access, he cannot resist the temptation to "read" JL, and he is subsequently scandalized to discover "a discrepancy in her underwear" (Frayn 28) (peach-coloured panties and a white bra). He finds this intimate knowledge nonetheless gratifying because it confers on him a certain power over her. He writes "I suppose it could have been worse. It could have been peach bra and lime-green knickers. I don't think I could have borne that. I think I should have struck her off the reading-list at the end of this academic year and taught *Middlemarch* instead" (Frayn 27). But the sweetest element of his triumph is that he has succeeded at raising himself, not simply above his competition, but more properly into her consciousness, and he confides that

I couldn't help thinking that this was a revenge for all these long years when she had been up there, oblivious of me, and I had been down here gazing so intently up at her. Because here she was gazing no less intently up at me; and for that short time she knew me. She knew me as I knew her, and we were equal. (Frayn 28-9)

Ultimately, this proves to be what Richard cannot resist and, at some level, was what he may have set out to accomplish as he sat across from her at dinner and acknowledged her rights as his queen in the realm of fiction. Certainly, it is an instrumental factor in his continued pursuit of JL, and he exclaims in her subsequent absence: "What I can't bear is that for one moment she recognized my claims, acknowledged my rights" (Frayn 38). As

a result, an intimate relationship becomes, in Richard's mind, the most reliable means to potentially reverse the dependency he has on his subject as his source, and to assert his "claim" and his "right" to demand a reciprocal arrangement that acknowledges him to the same degree that he acknowledges her.

So, in pursuing a relationship with JL, Richard basically sets out to regain the momentary recognition he felt from her, thereby avenging himself for what he feels is the unwarranted imbalance in their relationship. He longs to prove himself, and though he insists that he has no desire to be her superior, he cannot seem to help but react against his perceived subordination (as scholar to artist) by insisting not only on the counterbalancing merit of his claims, but on the actual, more notable achievement of his own overlooked and under-appreciated talent. Thus, he facetiously acknowledges that in her world "I'm nobody, after all," only to contend

No, actually I'm not nobody! If we're talking about achievement, if we're talking about distinction, then you know and I know that it's a damn sight harder these days to get a job in a university English department than it is to get a novel published...I'm the sovereign of *my* universe just as much as she's the sovereign of hers, and I demand the normal protocol and courtesies that one head of state extends to another! (Frayn 38)

This is a heady claim, but even Richard himself is not persuaded by it, and it remains his goal to immortalize himself in conjunction with JL in a much more satisfactory way than could prove to be possible as simply her critical follower. He gets his chance upon witnessing a rather dramatic event at her house, in which a "madwoman" lays waste to the writer's study and attempts to destroy her manuscript. Richard, very self-consciously,

intervenes on JL's behalf, rescues the manuscript and, seeing the dramatic potential of the scene, attempts to cast himself as the heroic saviour. And, although Richard recognizes the potential *critical* benefit of being witness to such a scene, it is the *literary* benefit to which he aspires. Excitedly, he writes to his friend:

Here I was at the very heart of the literary process. A uniquely well-qualified observer on hand at the beginning of creation. Because sooner or later she was going to have all this arranged in her mind...with all the irrelevant participants, such as me, cut out of it...And what would I emerge with, if I stuck to my trade? A page of incoherent jottings, which would be boiled down to make an awkward footnote in a memoir or critical biography ('The author was present when events occurred which may possibly have suggested the scene under discussion here'), which would then be cut out at the request of her literary executors. (Frayn 64-5)

Despite his disclaimer as an "irrelevant participant," it is obvious that Richard seizes on this opportunity to immortalize himself by becoming an integral part in what he imagines to be an importantly dramatic scene; a scene that will serve, he assumes, as future fodder for one of JL's novels. With this as even a potential outcome (again Richard is aspiring to be JL's subject/source), his own trade pales in comparison. For, as a critic, Richard would be left with only an embarrassingly over-eager attempt at proving himself "involved" in what is still the periphery of a writer's craft. This observation would be, by necessity, relegated to the margins of even his own critical study, since, as Richard seems to recognize, his excitement over his involvement in this scene is frankly as unprofessional as it is feeble. The fact that even JL's literary executors would have veto power over

Richard further aggravates the sense that his critical work would be incapable of recognizing or communicating what he sees as his notable involvement. Richard is forced to admit that his hopes for real impact in the literary world will probably only take place outside of the realm of scholarly study. Thus, after saving several pages of JL's manuscript from being destroyed, he notes, "something, somewhere in her works, will owe its existence to me." He then confesses, "this may be the most important contribution I have ever made to my subject. Or ever will make" (Frayn 72).

This scene is very important in that it foreshadows several important aspects of Richard's subsequent relationship and marriage to JL. In some senses, it even seems to set the pattern for his ensuing behaviour as the scene in JL's house makes it clear to Richard, not only that he is unhappy with his status as a critic, but that there are enviable alternatives. This is most obvious as Richard immediately begins to aspire to the higher power of the imagined literary executors, hastening to become JL's subject in, first, the most available way as her servant or helper. Thus, throughout the madwoman scene and after, Richard both implicitly and explicitly congratulates himself that "not since Boswell met Johnson has genius been so perfectly served" (Frayn 67). He puts JL to bed and cleans up the mess in her house, and begins writing to his friend to tell him of this new and important development in their relationship. However, deciding to check on her in bed, and probably revel in the fact of his guardianship, Richard discovers that she is not, in fact, sleeping, but that "she's *working*" (Frayn 68). This revelation scandalizes Richard because it displaces him from his imagined position as her keeper, and once again he is confronted by the probability that he is not actually a necessary adjunct to her creativity, but a superfluous presence to be located somewhere in its periphery. Nonetheless, despite

continuous examples of JL's personal strength and lamentable self-sufficiency throughout their marriage, Richard clings to the idea that he is somehow helping her because it becomes the only way that he can imagine himself a place that could be in any way considered as necessary to her.

In conjunction with his imagined servitude, Richard also begins to court pretenses toward a creative power of his own. This becomes necessary to him as a means of balancing out the subordination implied by his servitude and gratifies his desire to think of himself as a talent on a par with JL (if not literally the same, then at least similar). This desire is augmented by the fact that the manuscript which he credited himself for saving (the one that provided him with perhaps "the most important contribution I have ever made to my subject" (Frayn 72)) is eventually, in spite of his successful efforts, discarded. In its absence, Richard seeks to recreate this same level of achievement so he grants himself the status of creator as the initiator of their relationship. He affirms in a letter to his friend,

Yes, this whole strange painful shimmering thing, as I now see it, is in a sense my creation. I wrote the first sentence, just as she might write the first sentence of a novel. I invited her to come and be talked to, and from that everything followed... Yes, I invited her. Out of nothing I made something. (Frayn 70-1)

His use of the word "invited" here seems to ring to him as if he were saying "invented," and, in the imagined glory of this creative power, he is able and willing to give up, once again, his thus marginalized status as her critic, declaring

I've no thought, naturally, of turning my privileged position to my own academic advantage. Quite the contrary--I may have to give up teaching her. I'm not sure whether one can stand up in a lecture-hall and expound one's wife's thoughts, hazard guesses at one's wife's intentions, extol one's wife's moral seriousness. I may be professionally done for. (Frayn 82)

Richard's relationship with JL as her husband precludes the possibility of the professional distance necessary to him as a scholar studying and teaching her work, and his repeated use of the word "wife" in this passage communicates both the improbability that he should "hazard guesses at...intentions" he should, as her husband, know all too well, as much as it assumes the absurdity of expounding or extolling the thoughts and morals of a woman so intimately (and perhaps even subordinately<sup>5</sup>) related to him. But, at this point, Richard does not lament this as a defeat, but celebrates it as a victory, noting, "I shall take particular pleasure in seeing off all the other academic bloodsuckers... Taking me, my bride is, and forsaking all others. Sorry" (Frayn 82). Indeed, Richard suggests that he has not *lost* his professional distance, but *won* JL and surpassed his rivals by gaining a much more intimate and balanced relationship with her that outweighs the matter of their claims, which he tellingly reduces, at this point, to bloodsucking.

But Richard's pretensions to the status of attendant and partner-creator fail, and he is not avenged as JL's respected husband and lover or redeemed as more than a critic of her work. Instead, he begins to feel that his privileged access to her does not give him

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<sup>5</sup> I don't mean to suggest that Richard is in any way a misogynist (there is little evidence to support that), but that his ideas about marriage may still lean toward the traditional, or perhaps more simply, that they may be too clearly aware of the spectre of more traditional arrangements, that would acknowledge, at the very least, his unquestioned equality, if not affirm a certain requisite dominance for him as the husband.

anything he might have considered useful, and instead only robs him of what he was. He declares: "I have vanished completely" (Frayn 87). Indeed, he finds he is able to continue teaching his wife's works, because he has not, in fact, gained further intimate knowledge of what it is that she does or how it is that she does it; he still stands in a distant relationship to her work, and has not gained any measure of enviable access to the literary process or to a proper place in the literary world. In fact, he finds further evidence that he is, and very notably still, secondary to JL's primary occupation as a writer, and he begins now to complain as the neglected husband of a "major writer of our time" (as he terms it, a "MajWOOT") (Frayn 86). This growing insecurity is further exaggerated upon hearing of the birth of his friend's son. Immediately, he attempts to characterize himself as a kind of father himself: the "father" of JL's new novel, and he complains about the father's "traditional feelings of jealousy and exclusion" (Frayn 100). But Richard realizes, truthfully, that he no longer has any excuse to make such a claim, and he asks himself and his friend, bitterly, "*Am I the father?*", admitting "I can't recognize anything of me in little *Banquet*" (Frayn 101). Richard's more intimate involvement with JL works contrary to his intentions, and further erodes his confidence, such that his early cockiness is replaced by a more informed and destabilizing sense of his inconsequence in the realm of JL's creativity. This is demonstrated in part when Richard begins to refer to JL with the more informal, and affectionate sounding nickname of "maj," (short for MajWOOT), because, despite its warmer tone, "maj" is an appellation that calls attention to JL's "major" status, in contrast to Richard's increasing sense of his own marginalization.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This point is made most evident when Richard admits, "Little did I think...that I should end up married to

To make matters worse, Richard's desire to be immortalized, to be laid out "beneath the eyes of all literate mankind and eternity" (Frayn 14), is also turned against him, when it too works contrary to the way he supposed. Writing in reaction to her new book, he is not excited or proud to imagine that he may be laid out for all to see and recognize, but horrified, and defensive. Apparently arguing against his own suspicions, he contends,

I know that the middle-aged woman in the book who becomes involved in a coven of witches is not my dear old maj, nor anything like her. But will anyone else? I know that the rather feeble young man whom she kidnaps, then ties up, strips and rapes at a kind of feminist black mass, is not me, nor even any symbolic representation of me. But will the casual reader know? Will my colleagues? Will Swoff? Will Vlad? Will *you*? (Frayn 104)

Although he starts with the casual reader, who could conceivably be more interested in the sensational gossip than what could be formally and intellectually pursued and proven, Richard's movement through the different categories of JL's readers suggestively escalates into greater and greater levels of literary authority. His formally trained colleagues and certainly the other JL scholars would not be so readily duped, and their presence in this list suggests what his final inclusion of his close friend proves. By including his friend in this list of the potentially misled, Richard reveals the degree to

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one of the major writers of our time...No, bollocks. Not little did I think at all. Big did I think. I thought I'd end up married all right -- married to the wife of one of the major writers of our time" (Frayn 84). The sort of backward way that he comes at this confession exemplifies his hesitancy in confessing his desire to be a "major" writer himself, and not the person relegated to the secondary position of "husband of."



which the characterization of "the rather feeble young man" will, in fact, most reliably point toward him, as he foresees that even his friend's intimate knowledge of Richard, Richard's relationship with JL, and Richard's explicit denials, will not stand up against the persuasive nature of JL's writing. Thus, Richard's dream of somehow being immortalized by his wife's writing is turned into a nightmare, and his place in her novel exposes him to ridicule and/or pity, instead of the heroic standing he envisioned. Meanwhile, it is also made clear that Richard's intimate knowledge of JL has apparently *disqualified* him to read her novels, unlike he hoped, since it effectively prevents him from being able to accept what will successfully convince everyone else. The italicized "I" in this passage emphasizes the fact that he will be alone in his private knowledge, which, unlike he imagined, confers on him the less convincing status as the potentially injured young husband, rather than the much sought after authority who successfully set up house on the inside track. In the face of this crushing disappointment, Richard laments piteously,

What's happened to all that great drama on the stairs? I thought that's what she was writing about. I mean when I rushed up and tackled the madwoman. When I made her the Ovaltine. Why has she forgotten all about *that*?" (Frayn 104)

Richard was expecting to be the sensitive hero, capable of both dramatic physical intervention and gentle care-giving, but instead of his heroics he is granted the extremes of humiliation, and the figure that recalls him is not only apparently "feeble," but gets tied up, stripped and raped by the figure that may represent his wife. This is doubly ironic, of course, because Richard's desire to marry JL was hopelessly caught up in his desire to avenge himself and thereby become recognized by her as her equal, if not her superior.

Instead, what JL's writing communicates to him is the excessive, and essentially hostile,<sup>7</sup> nature of her power over him, power he could never hope to overbalance, let alone offset.

For although Richard wants to deny even the symbolic application of the two characters in JL's novel, their characterization does in fact reflect the continued imbalance of power between the husband and wife, scholar and artist. Richard's change in position, relative to JL, failed to guarantee him her respect, and even after a couple of years of marriage, she continues to flatly discount the merit of his work as a critic, never having "read a single word I have written about her" (Frayn 106). The evident failure of his aspirations to win her notice and respect by ingratiating himself into the literary realm or the creative process, however, has him reverting to his old tactics as a critic with a vengeance. Indeed, it is unsurprising that after reading her book he determines it a weak example of her work, and he reacts to it and the failure that it embodies to him by assuming the only power he has left to declare. With renewed purpose, he writes to his friend:

I'm struggling to overcome my natural diffidence because I feel that this is one way in which I really can help instead of hinder -- that I can put any slight negative feelings I have to positive use. I'm so close to her work -- I know considerably more about it than she does. I'm also rather more passionately committed to it than she is. So I am the only person in the world who can assist with little *Banquet*, whether I'm the father or not.

(Frayn 108)

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<sup>7</sup> This extreme of hostility springs apparently from JL's growing fear and awareness that Richard is intent on destroying her independence and interfering with her writing, a fear that is justified in the context of the

This echoes the professional conceit that Richard abandoned soon after he met JL, and it is clear that Richard is reverting to this as it is all that remains available to him when he may *not* inhabit the imagined place of father of the novel. Richard suddenly recalls his professional sophistication because he believes it allows him the objectivity and academic authority to see the faults and hidden nuances in the novel that he asserts are unavailable even to the author herself. Thus, it grants him a sense of his own superiority again, and transposes his desire to serve JL (and take some credit for the product of her creativity) back to his critical faculty. Indeed, it remains clear at this point, that although Richard may have reverted to his scholarly function out of desperation, he is still, in fact, looking to fulfill his desire to ascend to the status of the creator. He imagines that his critical help with the novel will answer to the heroics he failed to inspire in JL's writing in the scene with the madwoman, and he now casts himself as the saviour of the text that *is*, rather than the text that will be. As such, he apologizes to his friend for sounding "slightly obsessed," asserting that it is simply an understandable consequence "when your entire life and work have enabled you to help bring something of true transcendent perfection into this imperfect world" (Frayn 122).

Significantly, Richard's help amounts to the suggestion that JL take a more self-consciously *critical* approach to her own writing, and incorporate "some strong central framework of ironic self-awareness" (Frayn 115) into the novel. JL responds to this criticism by creating an authorial figure who appears in the text to comment on and thereby "confront the mayhem she has created" (Frayn 115). These suggestions effectively demand that JL become more critical of her writing herself, and they thereby

demonstrate Richard's desire to prove the importance of his work and what he deems as its proper place *inside* the literary framework. But, JL's publishers and other supporters reject Richard's suggestions and insist that the book is better without them. Richard's response is bitterly, and mockingly, self-effacing: "I'm not a writer -- I'm not a publisher -- I'm not even an agent. I'm merely a poor dull scholar who happens to have devoted his life to the study and explication of her works. I also just happen to be right, though" (Frayn 116). The "not even" is telling here as it is attached to the position *least* likely to compete with Richard's claim to authoritative knowledge about literature, rather than most, as the construction suggests, and demonstrates the degree to which he feels unjustly disregarded once again.

The failure of even this scholarly objective leaves Richard with little other choice than to finally tackle his own ambitions and the source of his insecurity head on. He asserts,

The flaws in her new book, that I can see and no one else can -- they suddenly seemed to me to offer a way through and under the mighty ramparts of literature...I don't see why the great castle of fiction should remain the exclusive preserve of the privileged few...It's a trade, writing, that anyone can learn, not a Masonic mystery. Part of my aim is to demonstrate that any bloody fool can do it. (Frayn 142)

As the battle imagery in this passage suggests, Richard is now finally prepared to attack his insecurity head-on, and "win" his ascendancy in the most direct way he possibly can. His role as a critic in the past allowed him to make claims and assert an authority in his own community at the university, but this authority, at best, could only hope to exert an

indirect influence, because he was attacking the fortress walls uselessly, from the outside. The futility of this approach prompts him to buy his way into the castle by willingly divorcing himself from the university community and claiming his undying allegiance, in marriage, to one of the initiated, but he finds, though this places him in closer proximity to the castle, it still does not allow him access. By becoming a writer himself then, Richard is finally hoping to prove definitively what he has all along been attempting to assert: that *his* profession is the one that requires the greater talent, the greater sensitivity to literature and the creative process, and that he is, in fact, in his own real way, as creative as "them." This would succeed in finally righting the imbalance in power between him and JL, as scholar and artist, because he, at long last, would be able to claim a talent verifiably equal to hers, thereby overturning her assumed "superiority" by exposing it as false arrogance. Thus, it is clearly *not* Richard's aim to prove *himself* "any bloody fool" by writing, but to reduce her to one. As a result, he writes excitedly to his friend, "I believe I can see how it's done...I believe I can see the trick," a prospect that allows him to think fleetingly, though meaningfully, "Just possibly...*she* will end up lecturing about *my* work" (Frayn 144). Writing his own book is ultimately the last in a long line of attempts for Richard to right the imbalance he has clearly fought against all along.

In the end, however, Richard's willingness to write does not make him an artist. He finds he cannot write creatively, and he can muster nothing sufficient to suggest that he ever could. Thus, instead of establishing the creative proficiency of "any bloody fool," Richard's attempt to write fiction finally defines for him his own limits and demonstrates definitively what he has been so desperately trying to avoid. She can do it, and he cannot.

She is creative, and he is dependent on her creativity, *because* he honours it and cannot replicate it. Richard finds out that the "trick" is not the practiced, and practicable, skill of a "trade," but something more elusive, and miraculous, and he is forced to concede. Richard cannot and will not gain access to the knowledge he needs to be able to perform as a creative writer, because it is something that cannot be accessed by the "skills of [his] trade" (Frayn 168) in scholarship. Indeed, despite his intentions, he has approached his entire relationship with JL, *as* a scholar, interested in a more intensive and a more authoritative research. What he finally discovers is that research will not reveal to him what he wants to see, and it will not reverse the imbalance in power that so unsettles him. At the end of their relationship, he is thus able to acknowledge what he tried so vigorously to defend himself against in the beginning, and he confesses to his friend: "I suppose that's why I started the book. To have something ... even she might recognize as something" (Frayn 168). After pursuing every chance at establishing his immortality and/or proving his greatness, Richard suffers the final knowledge that in the literary world he has pretensions to merely a secondary, and not a primary, role.

In *Swann*, Carol Shields creates, in some respects, a radically different character, with importantly different obsessions, in the character of Morton Jimroy. Principally, Jimroy is a much more successful critic than Richard Dunnett; he enjoys a certain fame, and thus seems to take for granted a certain level of authority in the literary world as a well-respected biographer of two famous poets, Ezra Pound and John Starman. This is importantly connected to the fact that Jimroy, unlike Richard, is also much more prepared to embrace poetry as something unequivocally greater than himself (indeed, as something greater than any mortal). Whereas Richard's scholarship reveals a certain desire for self-

aggrandizement, Jimroy's love of poetry has the capacity to suggest divine worship. Despite these discrepancies, however, the relationship between scholar and subject reveals itself to be importantly similar in Shields' novel and Frayn's, and studying the two novels in conjunction with one another reveals an interesting parallel. In Frayn's novel, Richard's relationship with his subject becomes a more distinct, and escalating, problem once he is forced to contend with his subject personally, while in Shields' novel, Jimroy's relationship with his subject is problematic exactly the degree to which, as a biographer, he is forced to confront the person and/or personality behind the poetry. Thus, both novels explore the scholar/subject relationship in what is depicted as a scenario of heightened tension, when the scholar is forced to confront the artist behind the art, and thereby deal with the implied subordination the grounds of their relationship assumes.

Morton Jimroy is a man who is very willing to declare his subordination in relation to poetry itself. Indeed, he tends to fashion himself as a sort of priestly intermediary between the higher realm of poetry and his own more lowly environment amidst both scholarly and non-scholarly worshippers. Jimroy, considered a "world authority" (Shields 188) on poetry, has three honorary degrees, including one from Princeton, and flatters himself, not unreasonably, that he is "a relatively famous man" (Shields 129) in the literary world. As such, he possesses a certain power, a power that he clearly enjoys and, in discussion, is inclined to assert (along with the spectre of his fame) in order to make himself distinct from those around him. Upon first meeting Jimroy, in the second section of the book, the reader is made aware of this tendency in his discussion with his landlady, Mrs. Flanner, whom he asks in a "polite, faintly stagy voice, if she would like a bank reference," anticipating the objection she obligingly voices when she

avers that it is not necessary since, "in a way I *do* know you" (Shields 86). In lecture, Jimroy is similarly self-consciously polite and "stagy," and conducts himself in a practiced, manipulative manner, condescending to his audience in a way that recalls Richard Dunnett's initial treatment of JL. Jimroy's authority here, unlike Richard's however, is self-consciously derived from his ability to give proper homage to poetry, and thus serve and protect the life of his poet-subject in his capacity as an academic biographer. Jimroy enjoys depicting himself as a sort of prophet or priest in this function, and he conspicuously sends a "long visionary look out over the heads of the audience" (Shields 96) when speaking of poetic genius, reacting defensively when challenged in this office, and becoming dramatically humble when praised.

This priestly manner is based on the coincidence of a fundamental misanthropy and a real love for poetry in Jimroy that places him, as a scholar, in the intermediary space between his essential disgust for the rest of humankind and his exalted reverence for poetry. Jimroy, in all his dealings with people, is antagonistic and unrelentingly cynical. He focuses cruelly on folly, uncertainty and ugliness in others in order to justify and maintain this hostility in all his dealings with the world, and to some degree to perpetuate the illusion of his own objectivity as a critic and his superiority as a scholar. This is tellingly revealed in his interview notes, where he sums up his many subjects with a calculated measure of disgust, dismissing people flatly and easily as they appear to him, variously, as "lumpish...vain," "pompous," "a cretin," "unpretty...needy," "unreliable," "bulbous nose," "senile" and "hopeless" (Shields 130). These dismissals reveal Jimroy's priestly manner as a kind of personal solution to the subject-source conflict he faces as a biographer. In order to effectively resolve the subject-source conflict and thereby



securely define himself in relation to it, Jimroy separates the matter of his subject from the matter of his source. As these interviews and his various interactions with the people in his life and the poets in his texts suggest, Jimroy regards his subjects as the highly fallible and thus easily dominated or dismissed *people* he encounters in his scholarship, while his source remains the *poetry*, which is thus protected by the taint of subordination implied by the word and state of "subject"hood.

This is made abundantly clear throughout the text as Jimroy enjoys the full measure of his authority in his relationship with other people. As a visiting scholar at Stanford University, he acknowledges his duty only reluctantly, complaining,

...he knew he would be required from time to time to "share" his experience as a writer of literary biography. The word *share* is an irritant, nevertheless, for what would these hundred or so naked faces in the audience share with *him*? Their gaping incredulity? Their eagerness for "advice"? (Shields 94)

Jimroy understands only his superiority as a scholar in relation to his audience and he is dismissive and condescending as a result, not recognizing even the possibility that he, as a teacher, might learn or, as a scholar, might be challenged by those he sees so clearly as his academic inferiors and on whom he relies only for confirmation of his academic status and scholarly distinction. Even in the company of other scholars, he is similarly pessimistic and disrespectful, and he reacts peevishly to the welcome he receives at Stanford:

Welcomed? A nebulous word. An ingratiating word. An oily, blackened coin. Community of scholars? Equally cut-rate, and ludicrous, too, since

they all looked like tennis players arrayed before him...[with] the conditioned eagerness of beagles, the fools, the idiots. (Shields 94)

Jimroy sees these people as foolish and idiotic because they are willing to give him so unquestionably the conditioned response of scholars to their Distinguished Visitor. But it is important to note here that Jimroy's distaste for those around him and the satisfaction that he derives from his scholarly status is clearly characterized as being driven by a more basic insecurity. Jimroy has distinguished himself as a scholar and thus enjoys the privilege of his pseudo-priestly office, but this office similarly disallows him to pursue success as an ordinary man (perhaps because he recognizes how unlikely that success would be), and he is clearly intimidated by the evident health and vitality of his assembled audience. Thus, despite his apparent disdain for those around him, Jimroy is vulnerable to certain crises of faith, when he is confronted by the limits of his vocation in relation to a world larger than the academic environment. In this case, the health and apparent pastime of this assembled group of scholars recalls Jimroy to the deeper reasons for his particular pursuit in life (in apparent contrast to academics who play tennis), and he declares sharply,

Didn't these monied Stanford sharpies realize that literature was only a way for the helpless to cope. Get back to your tennis courts he wanted to shout. Out into the sunshine. Live! Universities are nothing but humming myth factories. Dear God. How we love to systemize and classify what is rich and random in life. (Shields 95)

Jimroy's evident impatience in this passage reveals his insecurity as he identifies himself as one among "the helpless" who relies on poetry. But this passage is most important as it

makes clear the extent to which Jimroy imagines, both in his good moments and his bad, that his job is in some kind of service to the divine. As such, he depicts poetry as that which is capable of reassuring the helpless, and describes the university in a way that suggests the traditional institution of the church, insofar as the church codifies and standardizes the mysterious function of faith. Jimroy stands in relation to these people as a priest figure disillusioned by the negligent faith of his congregation, for it is not poetry, but they who disillusion him by suggesting their relative independence from scholarship and from him. Like the exasperated authority figure that he is, he longs to dismiss them while simultaneously recognizing the necessity of his own faith. For it is poetry that inspires the full measure of his devotion, and he confesses

It had always seemed something of a miracle to him that poetry *did* occasionally speak. Even when it didn't he felt himself grow reverent before the quaint, queer magnitude of the poet's intent. When he thought of the revolution of planets, the emergence of species, the balance of mathematics, he could not see that any of these was more amazing than the impertinent human wish to reach into the sea of common language and extract from it the rich dark beautiful words that could be arranged in such a way that the unsayable might be said. Poetry was the prism that refracted all life. It was Jimroy's belief that the best and worst of human experiences were frozen inside these wondrous little toys called poems.

He had been in love with them all his life... (Shields 102)

Poetry saves Jimroy from an otherwise overwhelming cynicism and a self-confessed "talent for misanthropy" (Shields 125) as it stands as evidence of the creative power and

both magnitude and bravery of spirit of which human beings are capable, and that Jimroy otherwise fails to perceive. What seduces him, therefore, is "the poet's naïve courage" (Shields 102), because it effectively balances and, indeed, even potentially outweighs the rampant folly of humankind, so that, when Jimroy is able to forge a vital connection with poetry, through his appreciation for it, and in his scholarship, he believes in the possibility of something miraculous and transcendent in life. It is perhaps not surprising then that his only apparently real joy in life is located in his scholarship, and turning to his work, he thinks "how joyous it is to be working again, to set his thoughts adrift on the scholarly sea. How puny they are, these thoughts, but how precious, tossing like flecks of foam, his little loves, his little discovered truths" (Shields 105). This joy in his work is recognizably at odds with his more dramatically and self-consciously priestly performances in public as Jimroy is able, while working alone, to forego any need for distinction or greatness in relation to those around him. In public, Jimroy relies on his fame and authority to distinguish him because he feels little respect for people, and thus desires to distance himself from them. But, while working, Jimroy enjoys the relative freedom and exaltation of subordination to greatness, like that of a servant to the divine. He is able, as a result, to enjoy even the smallness of his contribution in its relation to what he perceives as true greatness, and his use of the word "puny" with respect to his scholarship has that quality of exalted modesty he affects in public, such that it takes on the quality of an endearment, "little loves," "little... truths," rather than a slight.

It is also significant that Jimroy's love for poetry is connected to its ability to ensure that "the unsayable might be said," since his characterization of it as a "prism that refract[s] all life," allows his scholarship a consequent distinction as a further gloss on the

poet's effort to make sense of the world. Indeed, Jimroy's stated admiration for "the poet's naïve courage" (Shields 102) works to distinguish his biography as it chronicles that courage and therefore attempts to reconcile the fallible poet as a person with his/her almost divine capabilities as a poet. Just as poetry attempts to say what cannot be said and thereby capture all the best and worst of human experience, so Jimroy's scholarship attempts to provide order and illumination to an otherwise nebulous and chaotic existence. As such, his scholarship achieves a status relative to poetry itself and in a rare moment of contentment Jimroy confesses his feeling that, indeed, "This is happiness...these scrawled notes, these delicate tangled footnotes, which...will evolve into numbered poems of logic and order and illumination" (Shields 145-6). To Jimroy, poetry, and by extension, scholarship on poetry, provides "logic and order and illumination" in a world he perceives as beset by folly, ugliness, and uncertainty, and as such it becomes perhaps the only path to redemption in the life of this otherwise "helpless" man.

It is important therefore that Jimroy works as a biographer and not a critic, as his scholarship effectively operates as his attempt to reconcile his misanthropy with his reverent love for poetry, and to discover how "from common clay, works of genius evolve" (Shields 96). That is, by writing biography, Jimroy attempts to find a balance or even a more proper *relationship*, and explanation, for the subject-source split he designates between person and poet. But, although this may provide him with a certain motivation, it also ultimately frustrates him as he attempts to reconcile what he has so conclusively, and preemptively, divided. Thus, he equivocates,

He is not such a fool, he tells himself, as to believe that poets and artists and musicians possess an integrity of spirit greater than other people. No, of course he has never gone in for that kind of nonsense... And yet... how is he to connect Mary Swann's biographical greyness with the achieved splendour of *Swann's Songs*? (Shields 132)

The qualitative statement "he tells himself" is revealing here as his impatient declarative "No, of course" lies in specific contrast to the persistent, querying, curtailed voice that holds "And yet." Indeed, it seems clear that Jimroy is emphatically declaring himself "not such a fool" while being confronted by the poet's mundane humanity, at the same time that he, nonetheless, cannot avoid what "the achieved splendour" of the poetry suggests to him. Thus, he tellingly refers to his biographical work in terms of the tension between the disillusionment of "apostasy" (Shields 97) and the fear of "apotheosis" (Shields 99). And, when talking to Rose, he reveals a desire to hold to, and, indeed, perpetuate the myth of the poet's heightened "integrity of spirit," by informing her of the poet's ability "...to speak of those states of consciousness of which he or she has no personal knowledge" (Shields 185), and maintaining that "true poets carry a greater share of the racial memory than do we lesser beings" (Shields 185).<sup>8</sup> Of course, Jimroy says this, in part, as an attempt to justify his reading of a poem by Mary Swann that Rose, in her unprofessional practicality, is attempting politely to refute.<sup>9</sup> But his position and his attempt to assert this authority is also importantly linked to the substance of his reading, and he clarifies himself significantly, stating

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<sup>8</sup> Once again, Jimroy is assuming a pseudo-priestly manner here as a professed "lesser being," but one that nonetheless possesses this privileged understanding.

What I meant was that great poets write from large universalized perceptions, and Mary Swann's blood poem seems to me to be her central spiritual statement... The blood, you see, is a symbol. It stands for the continuum of belief, a metaphysical covenant with an inexplicable universe. (Shields 187)

The poem in question here is translated by three of the four main characters over the course of the novel in order to reveal each character's specific predilections in translating its deeper meaning; that is, each of the characters reveals more about him/herself in the reading of the poem than is definitively revealed about Mary Swann and her prospective intentions. This being the case, Jimroy is actually confessing his own need for, and dependence on, the transcendent qualities of poetry. He, at some level, is admitting here to a desire to make this "metaphysical covenant with an inexplicable universe," and thereby reconcile his fundamental cynicism with the capacity for faith that his love for poetry reveals, and to which it answers.

Indeed, Jimroy seems to try to supercede his basic antipathy for people in his scholarship by locating the humanity of the poet in his biography, and thereby, proving the redemptive force of poetry. But he ultimately fails, because the poets prove to be more difficult, intractable, and ultimately resistant to Jimroy's attempts to locate that which makes them, as lowly human beings, capable of the greatness of poetry. As such, Jimroy "detests the popular fallacy that biographers fall in love with their subjects" (Shields 98), asserting bitterly that "writing biography... is the hardest work in the world and it can, just as easily as not, be an act of contempt" (Shields 98).

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<sup>9</sup> I also refer to this exchange in Chapter One.

The difficulty of biography for Jimroy can be located in the same kind of subject-source struggle that troubles Richard Dunnett in Frayn's novel. Although Jimroy is willing and eager to subject himself to poetry (and he expresses a real need for poetry to prove that there is something truly great and transcendent within the power of poets, and thus the scope of humankind), and although he feels joy in his work when it speaks to this sense of worship in him, he is only able to maintain this joy as long as his reverence for poetry outweighs the demands of the poet's personhood. As he becomes increasingly involved in his role as biographer, this emphasis becomes more difficult to maintain, and ultimately, Jimroy is forced to confront the apparent disunity, rather than the potential harmony, between his sense of the reverential importance of poetry (as his source) and his misgivings about the debased personal history of the poet (as his subject). This disunity eventually transforms the purpose of Jimroy's work, and he becomes locked in an adversarial struggle in which personalities, both his and the poet's, overwhelm poetry, rather than the other way around. Thus, though Jimroy staunchly maintains that the "work possesses a greater degree of dignity than the hand that made it" (Shields 96), he demonstrates a reluctance, even an inability, to really believe it.

This is made evident throughout Jimroy's work. For example, in his first biography, on Ezra Pound, Jimroy moved from the greatness of Pound's poetry to the disappointing reality of Pound's personality. Instead of finding evidence of genius and sensitivity, Jimroy found "nasty little racial theories" (Shields 98), "pettiness... fatuous self-stroking... ghastly ambitions... [and] Elephantiasis of the ego" (Shields 99). This movement from the realm of poetry, which inspires worship in Jimroy, to the realm of personality, which inspires hatred and disgust, transforms the nature of Jimroy's



biographical project (and his purpose within it), and he finds that, instead of wanting to commemorate the man as a poetic genius, he wants to expose him as a fraud, as just another one of "the fools, the idiots" (Shields 94). He recounts that

The longer he spent closeted with the Pound papers...the more he desired to hold the man up to ridicule. Those long months sitting at his oak table in his study...crowded by books, crowded almost to the point of suffocation, he had felt himself being slowly crushed to death by Poundian horrors. And as the horrors accumulated he became convinced that lovers of Pound's poetry should not be spared the truth about their poet. (Shields 98)

The reverence for Pound's poetry that provided the motivation for Jimroy to become the man's biographer is eventually crushed under the oppressive weight of Pound's personality, and Jimroy's scholarship becomes, rather than an attempt to find proof of the transcendent properties of the poetry in the man, an opportunity to disabuse the lovers of the poetry of that love, in relation to, and as a consequence of, the man. Thus, despite his intentions, Jimroy fails to protect poetry's divine properties; instead, he compromises them by linking them with the very thing he despises most: day-to-day human failings. He thereby compromises his own sense of (the merit of) his source, by pursuing and exposing the degraded nature of his subject (and his desire to *subject* that *subject*) of study.

What Jimroy ultimately proves to himself is the futility of his hope in humanity, and what he finds in its place is an aggravated sense of his own personal failings reflected in the degraded selfhood of the poet. In studying Pound, Jimroy is exposed to Pound's

moral decrepitude, but also a "moral ungainliness in himself" (Shields 100), and he is shocked by "the willingness, [and] the *glee* with which he offered Pound up to ridicule" (Shield 99). Jimroy discovers that without the compensating balance provided by his love for poetry, he is left bereft of hope, and his cynical misanthropy is reaffirmed instead of offset. Thus, his subsequent study of Starman, and similar experience therein, reveals to him only an emptiness in the poet that reflects his own. The reversal this occasions in Jimroy's purpose comes to its full fruition when it finally makes him suspicious even of poetry. Disillusioned, he is forced to ask "whether it was poetry he had come to despise," admitting his suspicion of "its scantiness and shorthand," and declaring: "It was so easy for a poem to be fraudulent, for what was the difference really between an ellipses and a vacuum?" (Shields 101). Shields' text suggests that the answer to this question is to be found in the reader, because the reader brings enough to the reading of every poem to answer to its ability to create different, yet still viable, interpretations. Thus, by subjecting his poets to the same critical distance and disapproval to which he subjects those around him, Jimroy loses his faith in the suggestive promise of the poetic ellipses and confronts the hopelessness of the vacuum.

Jimroy survives these crises of faith only by eventually reaffirming that which he momentarily loses in his love for poetry. So, he admits that

The discovery of [Mary Swann's] poems a few years ago...rescued him from emotional bankruptcy, and at first, he *had* loved her. Here was Mother Soul. Here was intelligence masked by colloquial roughness. Her modesty was genuinely endearing and came as a relief after two monomaniacs. (Shields 103)

Mary Swann's poems save Jimroy because they reaffirm his love for poetry and consequently his only lingering belief in the potential of humankind. When he knows only her poems, and before he really confronts her as a biographical subject, Jimroy is able to declare that he does, therefore, "love" Mary Swann (which refutes his earlier stated impatience with the popular misconceptions surrounding the biographer's art), and that he believes her poems are evidence of a *personal* greatness. As a result, Jimroy turns to "marvellous Swann, paradoxical Swann" (Shields 103) as his new subject, and the process that transmutes admiration, hope, and interest, into scholarship, and then finally into despair, is renewed and played out in full across the remaining portion of this section of the novel.

Initially, of course, Jimroy turns to Mary Swann as a way to redress the empty arrogance and moral clumsiness into which his previous subjects led him. He suggests that it is

... natural (inevitable, he [tells] himself) that when he came to write a third biography, he should choose as his subject another poet: not a muling modernist with Left Bank pretensions this time, but a woman named Mary Swann, a woman who had lived all her lean, cold, and unrewarding years in rural Ontario. (Shields 103)

Jimroy embraces Swann, in large part, because she promises to prove incapable of the same meanness of spirit he found in Pound and Starman. Swann, as a woman leading an impoverished life, promises an asceticism, a self-discipline, that should make the excessive arrogance Jimroy so fervently objected to in his other subjects impossible.

Also, because he is studying an undiscovered poet of apparently untutored genius, Jimroy

will not have to fear the function of his own scholarship on Swann as a perpetuation of the ambitions of an over-inflated ego. Instead, he has the opportunity to congratulate himself, and to be congratulated, as a saviour of an unremarked talent. As such, he wants to protect Swann from unsympathetic theoretical critics who would, as he sees it, "[tear] her limb from limb in a grotesque parody of her bodily death" (Shields 95). Instead of this kind of aggressive and violent criticism that, declaring a dominance over its subject, invades and dissects, Jimroy imagines himself as providing a service to Swann's talent, declaring: "He would take revenge for her. Make the world stand up and applaud" (Shields 103).

The fact that Swann's life supplies no evidence capable of undermining Jimroy's emotional investment in her poetry, is, at first, a welcome change from his previous experience as a biographer. Indeed, the unrevealing nature of all that is known about Mary Swann allows Jimroy to turn repeatedly to her poetry for guidance and inspiration whenever the biographical details fail. Thus he is able, for a time, to continue to *interpret* Mary Swann as he sees fit. For example, after hearing that she never went to church, he maintains: "I suppose I see her ... as someone whose faith was exceedingly primitive and mystical" (Shields 184), (which is something that he clearly finds attractive and commendable). This assumption allows him to continue to use her as a source for his own spiritual needs and beliefs. As a result, Jimroy's belief in the redemptive power of poetry fully revives, and the occasion of this revival immediately reconnects him to his initial project as a biographer, allowing him to transcend the overwhelming despair he suffered writing his previous two biographies. As such, he is suddenly able to admit, that,

...despite everything, he is always moved when his thoughts settle on the riddlesome nature of his two large, imperfect men, Pound and Starman, thick-fingered, crippled by provincialism, morally clumsy--but made graceful, finally, by their extraordinary reach. (Shields 102-3)

Jimroy trusts that Swann will finally prove worthy of his attempt to reconcile the folly of humankind with this capacity for grace. This is not finally the case, of course, and despite his intentions, Jimroy's scholarship places him in an adversarial relationship with his subject, and, after awhile, the lack of any definitive biographical information begins to appear to him to be as aggressive as any other kind of unwelcome "fact." He admits,

The fact is--and why deny it--Jimroy has come to distrust Mary Swann slightly. In recent weeks he has felt his distrust turn to dislike. Here was impenetrable solipsism. One was always straining to catch her tone. Furthermore, she was unreliable about dates, contradictory about events, occasionally untruthful. A Poundish falsity was creeping into her life, drowning her, obliterating her. Starmanesque delusion was gaining on her. (Shields 104)

In his disillusion, Jimroy completes the cycle again, and Swann, rather than redeeming poetry and the poets before her, becomes infected by them. Swann has proven to be "Poundish" and "Starmanesque," because she has finally failed to provide the evidence of genius that Jimroy seeks. While Pound and Starman may have proven themselves *unworthy* of poetry, Swann seems to leave nothing to suggest that she should be *capable* of poetry and thus Jimroy is still unable to connect the poetry with the life that conceived

it. Thus, Jimroy finds that his image of Mary Swann, as represented by her picture, "[has] changed" (Swann 129). Suddenly,

Her face was hard, unreasonable, closed, and invoked in him a fever of shame. I am a relatively famous man, he said to himself, seeking comfort. My name is well known, and I have no reason to be ashamed. (Shields 129)

Mary Swann finally offers him nothing, and remains, to him, closed; the fact that Jimroy reverts to the spectre of his fame and reputation to justify himself is telling here in that it recalls his similar attempts to aggrandize himself in relation to the people he confronts in real life. As such, Swann is transformed from his source to his subject in much the same way that Pound and Starman were before her, and Jimroy, rather than serving her, begins to exert his will over her, relying on his authority in much the same way that he does socially. This occurs as a clear consequence of Jimroy's movement from Swann's poetry to her personhood, and, as a result of the fact that "the poems and the life of Mary Swann do not meld" (Shields 132). Faced with this, he "begins to despair" (Shields 132), recognizing that "even with the background material and the critical commentary, this will be a thin book, a defeat" (Shields 133). Swann is unable to provide for him what he needs as a scholar and what he wants as a man: proof, or even the suggestion of proof, that somewhere in all the "biographical greyness" (Shields 132) of Swann's life, there is a *reason* or a *cause* for "splendour" (Shields 132).

Jimroy again begins to suffer from what Richard Dunnett suffers throughout, the ungratified desire to dominate the subject by asserting scholarly authority. This desire appears as an unbidden attempt to compensate for a perceived imbalance of power,

which, in Richard's case, is evidenced by his reluctant acceptance of the superiority of creative power, and, in Jimroy's, by his failure to, as a scholar, find and prove "grace." In both cases, the scholars are forced to contend with the problem of critical work that presupposes a love, interest in and/or admiration for the subject, while it simultaneously demands professional objectivity and disinterested judgment concerning it. This conflict is, in both cases, further aggravated by the environment of the university that demands a full measure of educated authority and professional sophistication *inside* its walls, while not appropriately preparing the scholar for the insecurities and demands this insularity may provoke once outside them.

## Chapter Five -- Solitude and Civility

The university's relationship to the public is a common concern in much of the writing on the university, both fiction and non-fiction. In fact, the current crisis debate comprises often lengthy speculations as to whether or not the university is still operating adequately as a social institution in its service to the community at large. Of course, this is a question not easily answered. Radical technological advancement, a growing dependence on newer media forms, and recent theoretical developments that encourage uncertainty and undermine notions of value all conspire to call into question the relevance, or even the possibility, of a clearly defined social imperative, and the university community often must grapple with the sense of failing the public, while it remains unclear in what manner they are actually meant to serve them. This situation aggravates the sense of disunity between the public and the university and the university is perceived to be increasingly isolated and private. Its members are seen, and perhaps even encouraged, to hold themselves apart from the general public as they pursue their scholarship myopically, driven (it is suggested) so ruthlessly by internal legitimization struggles and power plays that they are incapable of considering anything beyond their most immediate environment.

No matter its cause, the effect of this self-absorption is a common concern in the university novel and is of particular importance in the novels *Textermination* and *Moo*. In *Textermination*, Christine Brooke-Rose explores the potential consequences of the exclusionary theoretical and critical practices used in and by the humanities department in the university. Her novel considers the growing influence of film and television in



people's lives, and asks if the great literature of all time is threatened, not simply by these ever-popular new media, but, perhaps more notably, by scholars in the humanities who fail to make literature relevant or meaningful to contemporary society in light of the challenge embodied by film and television. In *Textermination*, the university is depicted not as an integral part of, but as an isolated faction of, the larger society, conspicuously overwhelmed by its own interests and pursuits.

The larger implications of this isolation are explored further in Jane Smiley's *Moo*, in her depiction of the work of several fictional scholars, narrowly focused on their subjects. Through the characterization of these scholars and their work, Smiley demonstrates the degree to which the university promotes and perpetuates scholarship that is highly idiosyncratic and that is geared toward success inside the university community regardless of the consequences for the larger community. Smiley depicts the university as a place where grant money and prestige points in fact blatantly override concerns for social feasibility and practical utility. These practices are criticized to the extent that they perpetuate the insularity of the university community to its own detriment, and reduce its efficacy as an institution of, and for, society.

Similar concerns are reflected in much of the non-fiction written on the state of the university, further proving the relevance of this as an issue in the university today. Scholar-critics often decry what they perceive as the increasing estrangement between the university and society at large, characterizing it as not only one of the major regrettable outcomes of the perceived current state of crisis, but the one that requires the most immediate repair. In the humanities, professors of literature (by far, the largest percentage of those currently writing on the state of the university) worry that "we...have

ignored both public responsibility and the public as readers..." (Woodring x), and determine that "our present perplexities stem as much from the wealth of specialized inquiry as from the poverty of general discussion" (Damrosch 4). Critics fear that the current state of insularity must (if it has not already) lead to an incidental status both inside and outside the university. The desire to be original and innovative (it is argued) has, rather than making scholarship more subtle and important, made it more obscure, and in some cases, proven to be irrelevant or unimportant outside the university community. This has narrowed the field of inquiry so perceptibly as to shut out general public access, a fact made most evident by the scholarly propensity to use difficult, jargon-ridden language, language that does not even attempt to address the public, but rather serves more obviously as a way to exclude them and thus perpetuate the insularity and exclusivity of the academic community. Instead, scholars "need to try to go public with their ideas, and they can do so only when they are willing and able to speak a public language" (Brooks 166). Failing this, scholars (at least, in the humanities) face the possibility of becoming

...privatized, marginalized, [and] trivialized, content with debates within closed compartments, and with internecine struggles. Humanists sometimes seem to match a certain arrogance of their critical pronouncements with excessive diffidence in the public sphere, accepting marginal status in the public, and sometimes even in the university. They need to keep in mind that, whatever their critics may assert, they do speak of essential issues of value, by way of others' recorded struggle to say how life should be lived. (Brooks 166)

Whether it be diffidence or arrogance, what is made clear in the non-fiction writing on the state of the university is that many members of the scholarly community feel that they are somehow losing their connection with the public at large in their work, and, as a result, they are losing confidence in the nature and the function of the university's social responsibility. Some critics contend that if academics continue to question the possibility of communicating responsibly with, and about, society in scholarship, they will eventually create an argument against their livelihood, rather than for it. Robert Lecker argues that the university's apparent belief that "it does not need to address any kind of public beyond the institution in order to survive...is dangerous and possibly suicidal" (13). Writing about the state of Canadian literature specifically, Lecker argues, "As the study of Canadian literature moves further and further indoors, it will become less and less socially relevant, so private in its venture that no one will be able to see it...it will disappear from public view" (13). The scholarly community, it is feared, like the theory department in Grudin's *Book*, will be left to pursue its peculiar and particular course in isolation until its absolute disappearance will hardly be registered as anything of importance. This, because scholarship has relinquished the necessity and perhaps even the desire to speak importantly to the community at large. So John D'Arms asks rhetorically "have not our scholarly communities been distancing themselves from the broader society that supports us?" (54), and, quoting Roger Shattuck, concludes

We are perceived as more successful at unsettling and undermining traditional values and societal roles than at connecting our findings with "lasting works...considered significant or revealed as great or beautiful," so as to better illuminate the human dilemma. (54)

The present state of scholarship, indeed, "does not encourage [critics] to be public" (Lecker 5), and this is an evident irony for a social institution, to distance itself from the society that supports it and from which it has sprung, an irony, it seems reasonable to imagine, that will not continue to be upheld, let alone tolerated. Thus, the emergent sense of scholarly self-isolation, although perhaps perpetuated within the university community, makes the university as an institution ultimately vulnerable to an answering withdrawal from the society that supports it. The university becomes vulnerable to the sort of anti-education propaganda cited in Chapter Three, as well as similar arguments that seek to justify a withdrawal of governmental support of the university as an institution perceived to be constantly in need, while neglecting or even refusing to adequately respond to the society it was originally meant to represent.

This results in the suspicion that instead of answering to the problems and/or questions of society, contemporary scholarship is creating an environment that reflects them in the extreme, not only by perpetuating them, but, perversely, by rewarding them. David Damrosch argues that the ironic situation the university finds itself in is, in fact "double-edged" because,

In some ways, our scholars have taken refuge in self-enclosed and often self-confirming academic discourses, advancing knowledge in some ultimate sense even as their own communities stagnate or decay around them; in other ways, though specialized, academic study has actually reproduced the proliferating complexity of urban culture and the isolation of individuals within "the lonely crowd." (37)

In this depiction, the university becomes not a place from which one may serve the public but a place from which one can escape the public by enacting, rather than answering to, one of society's most serious contemporary problems. The response to "the proliferating complexity of urban culture" has been one that effectively prevents academics from engaging objectively with it, because they have permitted themselves to come completely under its sway. While this proves that academics are *of* the society, it precludes them from being able, properly, to serve it, from being able to do anything important *for* it.

Robert Scholes calls the effect of the movement away from the public sphere into increasing isolation, "hypocriticism," explaining,

With every additional subdivision--each of which makes sense within the logic of professionalization--we are driven deeper and deeper into hypocriticism, for every move toward greater specialization leads us away from the needs of the majority of our students and drives a larger wedge between our professional lives and our own private needs and concerns.

(Scholes 82)

In answer to this increasing alienation, Scholes, among other scholar-critics writing on the state of the university, seeks to re-unite scholarship with its originating communal purpose, however that purpose may be ultimately articulated. Scholes writes,

It is the disparities between our professional needs and our personal desires, as well as the gap between our pedagogical practices and the needs of our students, that turn us into hypocritics. The remedy...is to rethink our practice by starting with the needs of our students rather than

with our inherited professionalism or our personal preferences. (Scholes 84)

Thus, a sense of defining purpose, however it may have been reduced and eroded after technological and theoretical advancement, critical disillusionment, and financial crisis, must be predicated on a clear sense of responsibility to the public. For the coincidence of this sense of disconnection from the public, and the rise of society's dependence on the visual mediums of film and television, place the study of literature, and the study of the humanities, in jeopardy.<sup>1</sup> As a result, it becomes all the more incumbent upon academics to communicate the necessity and the unique value of what it is that they study:

We academics need to say in a letter to the world what we can show in the classroom, that reading profound literature is fun, that unlike addictive narcotics it can both brighten and deepen the reader's ordinary life day-to-day. We need to discover, describe, and propagate current fiction that affords deep and lasting pleasure. That such intensely superior fun rests on epistemological uncertainty should be a minor issue in a society losing touch with the printed page. (Woodring 73)

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<sup>1</sup> I am allowing the concerns of humanities departments, and even more specifically literature departments, to represent the university as a whole here as the traditional university education was conceived very much with the necessity of the study of great works of literature in mind. So, while many of the scholar-critics and Christine Brooke-Rose are speaking specifically about literature, their commentary has resonance for our conception of the university as a whole and for the work of all university scholars. This should be, in part, demonstrated by the movement into Jane Smiley's *Moo*, which tackles the question of public responsibility in the university on a larger scale, yet still retains specific connections to the arguments put forth in the non-fiction work on the university as it does with Brooke-Rose's novel, *Textermination*. It is also manifest in the larger issues of the university that have been discussed earlier. For example, if the study of literature and the humanities are phased out on the basis of their inutility in our contemporary society, then the measure of utility will gain force enough to change the nature of the university itself in a dramatic enough fashion to leave none of its departments or disciplines unmarked.

Woodring suggests that honouring public responsibility as scholars, both in the humanities and in the larger university community, is not only something that academics should be doing, but something that they must do in order to prove their relevance in a world that has clearly demonstrated the power and propensity to make reading an obsolete practice.

The prevailing fear is that any hesitancy to declare the social value of great literature could result in the loss of the special value of literature (and the history of ideas and evolving artistic sensibility that literature represents). This is not a time to engage in further debate, no matter how provocative the ideas that test the merit of literature might be, for literature as an institution is now too vulnerable. So Scholes announces, "In the age of mass media, literature has...lost its aura. We can either pretend, ostrichwise, that this has not happened, or decide what to do about it" (164). A decision must be made quickly, because, presumably, scholars of literature are the most qualified to answer to a society that is now questioning the need to study literature at all. The failure to answer in a timely and convincing manner, may not only endanger the study of literature, but, it is suggested, may in fact make wide-spread *literacy* a thing of the past. The consequences of losing a sense of literature's uniqueness, relevance, and importance in society could conceivably, therefore, result in the kind of mass extinction of books that Brooke-Rose puts forward in *Textermination*. As Alvin Kernan argues in his book titled, *The Death of Literature*,

Literature began to lose its authority, and consequently its reality, at the same time that the ability to read the book, literacy, was decreasing, that audiovisual images, film, television, and computer screen, were replacing

the printed book as the most efficient and preferred source of entertainment and knowledge. Television, computer database, Xerox, word processor, tape, and VCR are not symbiotic with literature and its values in the way that print was, and new ways of acquiring, storing, and transmitting information are signaling the end of a conception of writing and reading oriented to the printed book and institutionalized as literature.

(9)

Thus, the theoretical debates that have throughout the study of literature been at its core (is literature important, why is it important, how is it important?) are now becoming real questions that require real answers, right now.

In *Textermination*, Christine Brooke-Rose confronts this problem by giving the academy's inability to persuasively answer these theoretical questions "real-life" consequences. In her novel, all the great literature of the world and its characters are in fear of extinction both individually and collectively. Their being is only perpetuated by "the Reader," whom they all worship as a result, and who, by reading them, and thus conceptualizing of them, ensures their continued existence. Worried by the tenuous nature of this continued existence, the characters gather with hopes of renewing their presence in the world and in order to pray against the waning power of all literature. This hope, and prayer, takes on a ritualized form at "the annual Convention of Prayer for Being" in San Francisco, in late December, at the Hilton Hotel. This is an interesting setting as it is obviously meant to recall the annual MLA conference, and suggests both the dubious nature of literature's continued existence, and the reality of its diminishing status. Certainly, it is important that Brooke-Rose places the most real and dire



consequences of the waning interest in literature into the context of the academic conference as it is the environment most obviously connected to academic insularity, insofar as most conferences are conducted only by and for academics. The conference is also an example of the wider social insignificance of the academic world, as there is little demonstrated desire on the part of the public to break into these meetings, an understandable consequence of the discussions, which are often theoretical in nature and tend toward increasing levels of obscurity and ambiguity rather than clarity and certainty. Thus, the setting of the conference proves that literature is already marginalized both by the necessity of a prayer for being and by its specific location.

Brooke-Rose, furthermore, makes it clear that the question of literature's continued "being" is one familiar to academics in contemporary literature departments, who themselves have reason to fear possible extinction. The "stars of academia" (Brooke-Rose 34) running the Convention are quick to question "the sanity of [their] whole enterprise as usual" (Brooke-Rose 36), and express their fear that "these Conventions of ours are commencing to be the hilarity-focus of other disciplines, AND of our own colleagues in drama, film and TV departments, who don't have the same problems" (Brooke-Rose 36). As representatives of literature, academics are perhaps not the best suited to ensure its continued existence in society as the tenuous place literature holds in current society is reflected by the tenuous position the discipline of English holds in the university. That is, the Convention of Prayer for Being does not revivify these literary scholars in their sense of duty or solidify their sense of purpose in studying literature, as one might suppose, but, rather, calls it, and themselves, further into question. They imagine the silent accusation coming from the other disciplines that they are simply

"here...to defend [their] turfs," "Cashing in on" another fad "the way we always cash in on the latest fads and other disciplines," leading one of their members to conclude bitterly, "We don't exist either" (Brooke-Rose 37).

Creating scholars with such tenuous grasps on their own existence, Brooke-Rose makes it clear that the academic conference offers a rather dubious opportunity for an effective response to the looming extinction of various literary figures. She suggests instead that the case for literature is not well-represented by academics and the conference is an example of its dim future in the society rather than a legitimate hope for its continued success. After gathering at the conference, the characters, led by Hadrian VII,<sup>2</sup> are forced to face the nature of their predicament:

Dear friends and fellow characters, you all know the importance we attach to the power of collective prayer in this our desperate struggle for survival. Some of us have more existence than others, at various times according to the fashion. But even this is becoming extremely shadowy and precarious, for we are not read, and when read, we are read badly, we are not lived as we used to be, we are not identified with and fantasized, we are rapidly forgotten. Those of us who have the good fortune to be read by teachers, scholars and students are not read as we used to be read, but analysed as schemata, structures, functions within structures, logical and mathematical

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<sup>2</sup> This is an allusion to the character from the novel *Hadrian the Seventh* (1904) by Frederick William Rolfe. This character is used in the context of the novel as a politically correct figure, because he both represents a priest and is not one, having studied, and failed, for the priesthood. His presence is meant to provide comfort for those characters expecting a priest, but he is not a real priest for those who might be potentially offended by being led by one. He could be symbolic therefore of the confused nature of the academic conference that seeks to provide what it dare not, for fear of giving offense, a kind of band-aid

formulae, aporia, psychic movements, social significances and so forth.

(Brooke-Rose 25-6)

While the present state of things may suggest that being read by scholars etc. amounts to good fortune, it is made clear that it is symptomatic of the gravity of their situation that these characters should think so. Academics are charged with removing literature from life and therefore impeding upon a character's ability to comment on and influence life. This has rather dramatic results because, while scholarship seems to allow the characters to continue to be read and therefore exist, it effectively prevents the characters from being read in a way that will adequately renew their relevance to the larger community, and ensure them a continued existence. By becoming simply parts of functions and structures, the characters become less instead of more. Rather than being integrated into and becoming important in the lives of readers, they are serving as fodder for academic work, work that attempts to fit them into a sort of science-like organizational structure, which is ultimately, and dangerously, reductive. While structure, in obvious ways, serves academic scholarship, it does not adequately serve literature, and Hadrian VII is forced to admit to the assembled crowd: "this kind of afterlife has become somewhat tenuous" (Brooke-Rose 26). It is tenuous because it does not reunite character and reader but distances them from one another. In "this kind of afterlife," Hadrian VII observes:

It is as if the [Reader-]Creator [has] absconded, in... a cloud of  
unknowing. His mind's eye is no longer our constant companion,  
constructing us, adjusting us, fearing and loving and hating us, following

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solution that works only because it makes people feel better, while it is available only because it is ensured to be ultimately ineffective.

our pain and joys, our hopes, our calculations, our errors, our evil thoughts, our words. This is because His reading eye has closed, or looks elsewhere for these pleasures. (Brooke-Rose 26)

In the academic world, literature is associated with schemata and structures rather than the matter of real human emotions and lives. As a result, the reader looks to a medium that can still provide and speak to this range of human emotion, most notably television. Thus, it is important that the Reader is depicted as disappearing into "a cloud of unknowing" when the last of the good readers are "teachers, scholars and students," as it suggests that the educational service this type of reading is meant to provide is not succeeding in the society at large. It has become too formalized to provide the "pleasures" the average reader wants and expects, and thus fails to appeal to the reader in the way that it must in order to survive.

The conference itself reflects this tendency toward lifeless formulization that reduces the rich variety of literature to a sort of pseudo-scientific processing. In the novel, it is made clear that a system of organization is to some degree necessary in order to make the proliferation of texts and characters manageable. Hadrian VII explains, somewhat sheepishly, to the assembled characters, that "the high standard of organization" is regrettable, and apologizes if "some of you may feel it is regimentation," for it is "alas necessary on these occasions" (Brooke-Rose 24). Although it is clearly better suited to the academic climate, this sort of strict management is, nonetheless, overly methodical and too tedious to encourage or allow the personal identification and fantasy that is hailed as a mark of good reading. Brooke-Rose stresses the dreariness of this regimentation by regularly going over the organizational principles of the conference

in her text, thereby causing her own reader to experience their monotony first-hand. The occasion that brings together all these famous characters from classical texts therefore does not provide the drama one might anticipate but instead is typified by the often rather dry listing of names and announcements of scheduled activities. It is announced:

The Rituals of Being will occur four times a day at a pray-in, or prayer-session if you prefer, in the large reception-room... We've organized four sessions a day over these seven days... The order of the days and sessions have been drawn by lot... You are requested therefore to attend your relevant prayer-in and go to the reception desks in the gallery where you first registered, to obtain your admission card. (Brooke-Rose 16)

The necessities of the conference, as proof of its ineffective nature and basic sterility, are constantly intruding upon the expectation and desire for dramatic action, felt by even Brooke-Rose's reader, in this text, presumably, to the same extent that one is meant to understand it fails to satisfy the expectations of the "Implied Reader," upon which the characters all depend and whom they worship. For example, while Brooke-Rose provides the occasion for Emma Woodhouse from Jane Austen's *Emma* and Tomas from Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to meet, the matter of their conversation and potential for connection or comical disagreement is left largely at the level of suggestion while the details of the conference and the various and varying locations of the assembled characters are regularly tracked and detailed. It becomes the reader's function therefore not to pursue the different natures, periods, preoccupations or beliefs of the different characters, but simply to try to identify them and recall something about them as they stream about in a dizzying parade. At least to some degree, this must be seen as a

failing of Brooke-Rose's text in that she replicates in her own novel the sterility she is criticizing in the academics. Rather than allowing the kind of identification that she prescribes between reader and character, rather than encouraging the readers' interest or emotional response to the characters that are familiar to them, Brooke-Rose forestalls identification or fantasy in the interest of coverage. She lists more characters instead of dealing adequately with a few and this makes their conversations slight and forgettable rather than rewarding or memorable.

That this is supposed to be operating as a function of the text is nonetheless emphasized to the reader by the character of Kelly McFaddeon, who serves as one of the representative Readers in the text and who is the first stable point of narrative contact for the reader after a destabilizing mirage of voices and characters representing those arriving to the conference. Kelly is one of the Academic Interpreters serving the Convention as an expert in the field of literature. Kelly, however, cannot enjoy and make much use of her expertise during the Convention. Instead, she is immediately overwhelmed by the crowds (just as the reader is overwhelmed by the first two chapters of Brooke-Rose's text), and has trouble adhering to the organizational principle of the convention. Trying to make sure that all the characters are entering the right room according to the schedule, she can respond only automatically. She "feels flustered" and she "barely has time to glance at the cards, and to her horror she doesn't recognize every name" (Brooke-Rose 22). Inundated by a swarm of characters identified by the barest of narrative details from their home texts, Kelly forgets more than she remembers, and is left feeling that she cannot survive as an academic because she has not and can never read enough. But, when she discovers a more personal organizational structure, she is suddenly able to respond with

confidence and her memory comes back to her. Now, she realizes, "she must have read more than she thinks, forgotten less. She's not so illiterate after all" (Brooke-Rose 87). Kelly is able to remember the characters and "[bring] them to life" when she begins to respond to them personally, and though she still must organize them she is able to organize them along a formal principle more meaningful to her individually. She sorts them into "ranks and social groups" (Brooke-Rose 87), an organizing principle that emphasizes to her the unfairly hierarchical nature of social class, one that reflects her own preoccupation with her marginal status in the conference amongst the "stars of academia." Accordingly, Kelly becomes a good reader because she begins to identify with and fantasize about the characters in a way that makes them relevant to her personally. But, in the world of this academic conference, her place is too marginal for her to remain important. She has not been able to prove herself as an academic; she has only published one article and finds it difficult to process those she reads when they "seem to have nothing to do with plot or characters or social backgrounds or style" (Brooke-Rose 41). Kelly's preference for these things over her contemporaries' interest in "find[ing] effects in causes and repetitions of non-existent stories and split polarities and supplements" (Brooke-Rose 41) identifies her as a reader instead of an academic. But, as a reader, she has little to offer in the environment of the conference and becomes such a marginal character that she succumbs to the fate she was originally employed to help offset: she disappears. This is evidently meant to suggest that readers have no place in academic circles and are more likely to be intimidated by their failings in the strictly competitive environment rather than edified by their involvement with literature. But again, while this is ostensibly forwarded as a criticism of academia, it is too closely replicated in the

function of Brooke-Rose's novel as the dizzying lists of names will *fail* to be alienating only to a very select few.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Brooke-Rose's criticism is well-taken, but her expression of that criticism fails to live up to its own dictates.

Mira Enketei, the fictional author of the text of *Textermination*, ostensibly takes Kelly's place as the central narrative consciousness after Kelly disappears.<sup>4</sup> She introduces herself into the text in part by complaining about the misunderstandings regarding her work, arguing that what is "perfectly clear in the text" is misunderstood because "even serious critics don't read" (Brooke-Rose 63). This accusation relates to a sub-plot of the novel that deals with the appearance and disappearance, death, resurrection, and otherwise notorious behaviour and scandal surrounding the character Gibreel Farishta, who operates in the text as a sort of fictional representative of his author, Salman Rushdie. Brooke-Rose's invocation of the Rushdie affair emphasizes the running complaint in the text that books are too often read badly even by serious critics. Brooke-Rose seems to represent the Rushdie affair, and the dramatic heights to which it escalated (including book burnings and a death sentence), as a result of bad reading because readers mistook the ironic tone of magic realism for polemic. Brian McHale

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<sup>3</sup> Even the narrator most closely allied with Brooke-Rose admits that "On the research side, I have not read every tale...I have thus created a fiction too difficult for me to handle" (107). The ostensible reason for creating it seems to be a desire for coverage, to outline the amount of literature that has actually become or threatens to become lost to most readers, thereby emphasizing to the reader the dire nature of the problem. But, I think Brooke-Rose overshoots herself because the reaction she risks is instead that the situation is already lost. Like the scholars lamenting the current cultural decline in society, she is in jeopardy of proving that what is lost and not missed cannot matter, rather than recalling what is remembered and would be missed if it should disappear.

<sup>4</sup> Judy Little argues that Enketei "is probably narrating much of the text" because of earlier examples of her characteristic "punning phrase" (155). The character of Mira appears in two of Brooke-Rose's books and takes credit for "invent[ing] four" (Brooke-Rose 66), including Brooke-Rose's *Amalgamemnon*, *Xorander* and *Verbivore*, as well as *Textermination*.



writes that Farishta operates in Brooke-Rose's text as, "transparently a vehicle for Brooke-Rose's reflection on closure and the fate of literary fiction generally," explaining,

Like the real-world Salman Rushdie, Brooke-Rose's Gibreel Farishta is a marked man... But... more is at stake here than Farishta's personal survival, for the character (like the author whose surrogate he is) has come to stand metonymically for literary fiction itself, which is similarly under mortal threat from ideologies intolerant of his speculativeness, pluralism, and ontological irresponsibility. (McHale 207-8)

While McHale, quite fairly, targets the intolerance of certain readers, in Brooke-Rose's text, this intolerance is often characterized as a result of lazy reading first, that is supported by ideological intolerance, an important qualification with respect to the purpose of the *Textermination* Convention.

With so few readers, and those who do read reading so badly, the threat to literature cannot be underestimated. This threat is represented in various ways in the novel, but is perhaps most notably embodied by the invasion of the convention by fictional characters from film and television. These characters decide not to tolerate the attempt at reinvigorating literature that the Convention represents and come in to reassert their prominence as the new medium of fiction, shouting "Down with all these dead people out of books nobody reads!" (Brooke-Rose 58). As the new form of fiction, this predominantly visual medium offers something to the public with which, it is feared, literature cannot compete. As the leader of the conference, the academic Rita Humboldt explains:

there's a... fundamental difference, between the reception of a character who's there in front of us on stage or screen...and a character who appears gradually out of the reading process, the letters on the page, mere words, not made flesh but creating phantoms in the very varied minds of each solitary reader. It is in this imaginative build-up that...the characters of fictional narrative are threatened, in a way far more profound and more eroded by time than is possible with dramatic characters, at every moment made flesh before our eyes. (Brooke-Rose 120)

Film and television can move into a realm where literature cannot follow and as the society increases its dependence on this medium, preferring its relatively easily-won vitality over literature's more painstaking process, literature is even more severely threatened as the movement into bad reading could be completed by the public's refusal to read at all. In interview, Brooke-Rose has expressed her fear that "unless we do something the whole reading and writing capacity is going to just disappear" (Friedman, Fuchs 37). Television is a threat to literature not simply because people may prefer watching T.V. in their spare time over reading books, but because their preference for watching may replace their desire, and even their ability, to read altogether.<sup>5</sup>

If the last bastion defending literature against this threat is made up of academics, then literature's case may be a losing one. Once the film and television characters invade

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, and while expressing a similar concern, Alvin Kernan points out that ...the continued poor quality of speakers in TV sets offers an insight into how little concern the medium has with words. The pictures on the tube are constantly improved, but the speakers remain rudimentary. Visual images don't provide the same kind of truth as words. What they say is not necessarily inferior but it is different...Meaning is much more on the surface...less complex...lacking [in] multiplicity..." (*Death* 149)

the convention, a meeting is held and delegates from literature are chosen to represent their concerns while the assembled film characters crowd the room. The President of the Organizing Committee, Rita Humboldt, is called to address the assembly, and

... a murmur of astonishment goes up from the delegates and the film lobby as the tiny woman enters, manly, strong-jawed, short-cropped, in a black suit and bright yellow jabot like a host of golden daffodils. The thirty delegates [of literature], between her and the huge crowd of celluloid stars behind them, suddenly and unanimously feel lonely as a cloud. (Brooke-Rose 118)

The allusion to the Wordsworth poem "I wandered lonely as a cloud" makes it clear that Rita cannot provide the reassurance that she is meant to provide and that the host of golden daffodils provided the poet. Her appearance does not strike the audience as something wondrous, a natural phenomenon, symbolic of life and joy, as the daffodils struck the poet, but as something manufactured and false. The delegates instead feel something that recalls the loneliness the poet felt *before* he saw the daffodils and felt the effect of their "laughing company" (Wordsworth 145). The invocation of Wordsworth here also fairly recalls one of his most famous statements about the nature of a writer's art. In his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," Wordsworth characterized the poet's art as intense emotion recollected in tranquility,<sup>6</sup> but the business-like appearance of Rita belies the presence of intense emotion or an intense connection to art and she never manifests tranquility, suggesting that her connection to literature is materialistic rather than

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<sup>6</sup> "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (164)

instinctive. Instead, she is efficient and authoritative, even sterile, while she behaves in an aggressive and often cross manner. Rita is a businesswoman, a conference organizer, rather than an artist or a sensitive reader; there is even very little to suggest that she is a true *lover* of art. When she is faced with the possibility that the Prayer for Being may be a failure, she admits that this "depresses the hell out of me," but only because she has "devoted the clearest of [her] days and a large chunk of [her] professional life to its utilization and promotion" (Brooke-Rose 127). Thus, her appearance and manner as head of the convention does not inspire confidence nor does it reassure literature's delegates. Instead, when Rita begins her speech, the audience reacts restlessly and the narrator notes that her "peculiar academish doesn't go down too well." Rita "continues, a pitch louder" (Brooke-Rose 119), and finally succeeds in gaining everyone's attention, but as an academic, she turns the meeting into what might be considered a characteristically academic mess. Rather than providing a convincing defense of literature's prayer for being, she opens up the floor to a mass of personal grievances. Her colleague, Mansell Roberts, grimly notes that

As [he] has expected, the meeting [has] degenerate[d] into a chaotic series of speeches by written or acted characters, each anxious to prove... that he has not died... and so on until the main purpose of the meeting, as so often happens, is lost in irrelevant self-assertions. (Brooke-Rose 124)

Mansell's dismal thought that this is as it "so often happens" is enough to suggest that he believes this to be a commonplace occurrence in the academic arena, but Brooke-Rose goes further to emphasize that this is the case in her invocation of the canon debate.

The canon debate, perhaps more than any other issue in the recent history of literary study, promised definitive action by swearing to abolish the canon. But, despite its initial blustering sense of purpose, this action similarly deteriorated into the "irrelevant self-assertions" Mansell Roberts has come to expect. He explains,

There was tremendous pressure from...those who want to alter the canon...But they're so aggressive. And their position is illogical. They ought to want to abolish the canon altogether, on their premises that a canon is unconsciously a male preserve, a protection, like a club...So a female canon is a contradiction in terms...What they want is to replace the existing canon with theirs. So they want power too. (Brooke-Rose 102-3)

Brooke-Rose depicts the academics in her text as being ultimately unable to respond to problems with decisive action or practical certainty. As if it were a conditioned response, they rehearse their problems instead of solving them. It becomes clear that Rita is unable to provide the literary characters she is meant to represent with a viable defense so, instead, she initiates further discussion. Rather than offering reasons or reassurances, Rita asks that everyone defer judgment, explaining, as if in response, that two main conflicting views have emerged, thereby leaving them the stalemate with which they started.

Before Rita can finish, however, four ancient fictional figures arrive at the conference as if to, themselves, launch a defense for literature. The fourth and most notable of these characters is Scheherezade. Scheherezade offers to the assembled crowd the same defense of literature that she offered herself in her life: the power of an enchanting tale. By telling a story, she places the audience "All...under her spell"

(Brooke-Rose 127) and thereby offers the possibility of art as something capable of pleasure and enchantment. Symbolically, Scheherezade represents the life-giving power of stories. But, perhaps because the audience is filled largely with film and t.v. characters and officious academics, the symbolism is lost on the audience because they are either unwilling or unable to do their part in receiving it. The audience is so replete with bad readers/listeners that the characters, who came in search of comfort, instead have more and more reason to fear. Significantly, their lack of active participation gives Rita the chance to step back in and once again take control of the meeting. In specific contrast to Scheherezade, Rita represents the easily understood but sterile monotony of organization. She, again simplifying, recalls the audience to what she considers the main two points of the meeting and resolves to "put both these propositions to the Organising Committee," suggesting

that one representative of each view be elected by you, to attend this meeting of our Organising committee on Saturday, Room 0127 at two p.m... the two main groups have time to meet and discuss their position, elect their delegate and instruct him or her, hopefully with utmost clarity for the meeting will have, I'm afraid, other business... to get through.

(Brooke-Rose 128)

In the face of this manifestation of Rita's authority and control, and with the suggestive power of her proposed "action," it goes unnoticed that

the four beautiful people have been slowly dissolving like vapour...  
[the audience] is... too amazed by Rita's efficiency, her clarity, her authority... Out of the noisy chaos has come some kind of peace... a

promise of orderly, democratic solution... [has this] in fact come about through her efficiency... or through... the opium of the people, enchantment and mesmerization. (Brooke-Rose 128)

Rita's plans and manner are acknowledged for the promise of change and action that they represent, but they are ultimately a kind of opiate, soothing, but stupefying. They put off the problem rather than solving it or even fruitfully engaging it, and the characters are left feeling the adverse effects of this as a course of action. They leave the conference room feeling "...anxious to reach their rooms and recover from the dejection of the meeting where nothing has been decided, where they have felt helpless and unconsulted" (Brooke-Rose 131). Rita, as the head of the conference, has effectively put a stop to the chaos, but she has only identified the problem and promised further, and even more carefully organized, debate, rather than solutions or protection.

Indeed, Brooke-Rose seems to hold out little hope for the future of literature as it is so inadequately defended by the academics at the convention, and her text

uses different symbolic means to explore the imminent closure of literature itself as an institution. Twice... reenact[ing] that most venerable and resonant of all images of the destruction of the literary-culture archive... the burning of the library. (McHale 208)

The image of the burning library first appears as the burning of Atlanta in *Gone With The Wind* (Brooke-Rose 11) and sets off a series of allusions to the various book-burnings represented in literature. After the convention, however, and at the end of the text, these images are repeated (operating therefore as a thematic frame), and the image of the library fires gains force literally as the Hotel, the "temporary home for all the literary

characters exiled [t]here... [and] hence metaphorically a library" (McHale 208), begins to burn. This final fire emphasizes the ultimate irony of the Convention for the Prayer for Being, for, although initiated as an attempt to save literature, it more fairly marks its doom. With the fire, the convention finally and literally fails in its original goal as it has provided the occasion for all these literary characters to be assembled and thus provides the catastrophic moment of literature's immanent death by fire. As if in response to this devastation, and in order to further emphasize its apocalyptic proportion, the hotel fire finally culminates in "the long-expected final splitting off of coastal California" (Brooke-Rose 174), an event that can be figuratively read as an end to civilization as we know it. Brooke-Rose thereby makes clear the gravity of the situation in which literature's continued influence and survival is so immanently threatened, as it will mark a final and definitive cutting off from our past and the world as we have come to know it over time. But (and perhaps, nonetheless), instead of this final image of mass destruction, Brooke-Rose leaves her readers with, if not resurrection, at least a kind of reconfiguration. The literary characters manage to survive the cataclysmic disaster in California and are safely returned to their home texts. This might be perceived as evidence of the characters' ability to survive, but their return to their texts does nothing to actually reassure their existence; rather, it places them exactly back where they were before the Conference began. So, while it may be good news that the Conference did not destroy them, it did nothing to save them, and their home texts could well be the "coffins" (Brooke-Rose 85) to which they must return. Indeed, as a culmination of her book, and certainly in regard to its suggestive title, *Textermination* does not stand as a reassurance of literature's continued life, but a warning against its ultimate destruction, a destruction, that at least in



part must be credited to the inefficient response of academics to a public finding less and less reason to read.

The academics fail in *Textermination* because they do not provide an adequate response to the public's estrangement from literature and, within that response, find a way to defend themselves and the work of their department by explaining the inherent value of literature. The academics fail, therefore, in one of their most fundamental purposes in serving a public institution. In *Moo*, Jane Smiley explores this failure as it manifests itself across the university in a much broader sense, examining the life and work of several scholars from a creative writing professor to a famous economist to a doctor of Animal Science.<sup>7</sup> In *Moo*, Smiley investigates the university as an institution that, although public, and therefore automatically imbued with important social responsibility, encourages the work of individual scholars irrespective of that responsibility. In her own words, she explains, about *Moo*,

I would never have written an ivory-tower comic novel. I call my novel a slippery-slope academic novel, in which academia is not cut off from the world, but is constantly contaminating the world, is constantly both re-creating the world in its own image and re-creating the world. (191)

Whatever its internal ambitions are, the university is not cut off from "the world" or from society, because it exists as an institution *of* society. It is public, and the degree to which it ignores this responsibility is the degree to which it "contaminates the world" by attempting to re-create the world in its own image, and inflict the idiosyncratic demands

of "reputation-building and grant-writing" (Nakadate 196) on the public at large. This is demonstrated in the novel in the work of several scholars who, to varying degrees, fail in their public responsibility as academics, as teachers, and as men,<sup>8</sup> and thereby prove the failure of the university that supports them in their endeavours.

As scholars, several of Smiley's characters are engaged in scholarship that reflects perfectly their personal idiosyncrasies and obsessions, but shows little potential for benefitting the larger society, and, in some cases, should prove a certain danger to society if pursued. Most notably, Dr. Lionel Gift, famous economist, demonstrates beliefs that are clearly anti-productive in any larger social sense. He feels himself to be

a deeply principled man. His first principle [is]... that all men, not excluding himself, [have] an insatiable desire for consumer goods... In this desire, all men copied the example of their Maker, Who was so Prodigious and Prodigal in His production of goods that His inner purpose could only be the limitless desire to own the billions and billions of light-years, galaxies, solar-systems... that He had produced... He represented a model that the human race not only COULD strive for, but MUST strive for.

(Smiley 31)

The concluding imperative of this passage exemplifies not only the nature of Gift's belief but his specific desire to inflict this belief on the world around him. Dr. Gift considers his personal philosophy a perfect reconciliation of "faith and relativity, self and the vastness

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<sup>7</sup> Smiley's novel is notably broader than Brooke-Rose's not only as it applies across a larger cross-section of the university, but also as it is accessible to the opposite degree that Brooke-Rose's is allusive and exclusionary. Unlike Brooke-Rose's novel, *Moo* made the Book-of-the-Month Club.

<sup>8</sup> The characters discussed are all men.

of time and space" (Smiley 31), and uses it as the underlying base for all of his conduct as an academic, both as a scholar and a teacher. To demonstrate the destructive potential that lies behind this consumerist philosophy, Smiley has Gift use its suppositions to justify a desire to "dig a gold mine under the hemisphere's last primeval cloud forest" (Smiley 173), because "the thought of that gold going unclaimed, unpossessed... mock[s] consumer insatiability" (Smiley 174). This proves dramatically the degree to which Dr. Gift's "principles" are essentially anti-social by nature as they forward the cause of the individual self above and beyond all other concerns. Certainly, the environmental devastation promised by such a plan proves in practice what Gift believes in theory that "the nature of success" is such that one must "maximize one's own profits *at the expense of the group*" (italics mine, Smiley 142). Even while employed by a social institution like the university, Gift refuses to acknowledge public interest and seeks to gratify his own insatiable desire for goods irrespective of the consequences that desire may have on the society at large. Accordingly, in a report on the plan, Gift argues,

While gold mining is admittedly stressful to the environment in a number of ways, it is the opinion of this writer that environmental impact assessments will show that it should take a hundred years or less for the area in question to recover from the necessary impacts of mining, especially if the historically disruptive migrations of people to areas where gold has been discovered are prevented by adequate security. (Smiley 204)

Gift is prepared to pursue his self-serving plan despite large-scale environmental damage in order to secure personal wealth, a wealth he believes justifies a hundred years of

devastation, but which sees the possibility of profit-sharing (embodied by migrants looking for "a piece of the pie") as the matter to be more rigidly policed and investigated. Indeed, Gift is so narrow in his consumerist ethic that he is basically incapable of seeing the legitimacy of any counter claim. He affirms, "this gold seam... would keep that line on Gift's graph shooting upward... and really, that was what mattered most to those with the firmest grasp on reality" (Smiley 247). Gift, unaware of public responsibility of any kind, is seeking to inflict himself and his principles on the world, so much so that he considers his blatantly self-serving principles to represent a more largely defined "reality." In his work, Gift seeks to thus contaminate the world around him on the strength of his idiosyncratic and anti-social world-view, both figuratively and literally.

This danger is effectively demonstrated in the classroom, where Gift seeks to instill his materialistic principles in his students, teaching them that "to cultivate [one's indifference] [is] a way of avoiding illusions of sympathy or envy," and is "every individual's duty toward truth" (Smiley 142). Gift thinks of his students as customers and is proud to know that he can "entertain and please the customers, with no thought whatsoever" (Smiley 143). As such, he is pleased to know that his class will be enlarged by three times in the following semester for it answers to his primary concerns of increasing capital and the "intangible" intoxicant of fame that will be much more amply provided by "three times as many customers" (Smiley 143), customers who will not cause him any more trouble in larger numbers because his lectures require of him no thought and no personal involvement. Gift's involvement with his students, such as it is, springs from purely selfish motives and is delineated accordingly. As such, he enjoys the idea of

bigger classes because it feeds into his sense of power and control without causing him to feel any greater sense of responsibility, for

As usual, his exams would be given out by his graduate assistants and graded by the university computer. These grades would then be added to those already on the computer from the midterm, tallied according to statistical curve, and reported to the students. By then, Dr. Lionel Gift would have been in Costa Rica for over a week... He would not be here to see it, and that suited him perfectly. (Smiley 245)

Gift cultivates indifference in his students and demonstrates this indifference as their teacher, taking no interest or responsibility for what and how they learn, nor to what degree they succeed or fail in his course.

The potential effect of this on his students and the community they represent is tellingly demonstrated in a juxtaposition between the beliefs that Gift forwards in his class and the practical experience of one of his female students, Keri. Keri feels that, in Gift's class, she enters into "the Bizarro Planet, home of Bizarro Superman," where she hears "rollicking tales about an entirely alien planet" (Smiley 141). Gift's theoretical experience with economics contrasts sharply with Keri's own "experience in economics" which is "extensive and [was] gained on her father's farm through the farm crisis of the eighties" (Smiley 144). While Gift teaches that "the workings of the market unerringly produc[e] the general good," and that one must "value consumer insatiability above all other virtues" (Smiley 144) and that "the land [is] inexhaustible, and fertility... too" (Smiley 145), Keri's practical experience on her family farm has demonstrated to her unequivocally that these things are false. Thus, as an expert, Gift is utilizing his

characteristic indifference to cultivate a theoretical objectivity with respect to his subject that is totally incongruous with the world as it is. That Keri's viewpoint should challenge Gift's is demonstrated not only by the more valuable nature of her practical experience but by its domestic nature. Throughout her novel, Smiley uses domestic failure or success as a test of character. Gift's utter failure in the domestic realm is used to prove his irresponsibility as a man of the community, such that, to the degree that Gift fails to consider others in his scholarship and his teaching, his domestic life suffers. For example, nearing the end of the novel, Gift considers a relationship with a colleague in the following terms:

Dr. Lionel Gift entertained a thought...of bringing Elaine Dobbs-Jellinek, who he knew made eighty-three thousand dollars a year, under his personal umbrella. He even entertained another notion--she was not too old to produce one carefully raised son (the highest returns were always to be made on only male children)... (Smiley 402)

Demonstrating his privileging of capital over community, Gift considers initiating himself into even the smaller, domestic sphere only in terms of monetary gain. Although the very thought demonstrates some latent desire for community, Gift reconsiders this notion on the strength of "the most important principle he tried to teach his students... never to jeopardize your own return by indulging in an unproven, never to be proven faith in the common good" (Smiley 403). Ultimately, Gift rejects the community in all its forms--the larger society, his students and the spectre of the family--and establishes himself instead as a man working to service only his individual desires and needs.

Dr. Gift is not exceptional in the environment of Moo U. but representative of what Smiley depicts consistently as a negative and anti-productive form of scholarship. This is demonstrated in several similar characters, including Dr. Dean Jellinek who also courts a scholarly ambition that answers primarily to a personal obsession, this time in cloning, and who pursues that obsession without regard for social consequence. Dean Jellinek finds his personal motivation for his scholarship in the vision of "a clone herd, the perfect herd of perfect cows" (Smiley 55). Upon first having this vision, Dean asks himself, "Why would you do it?" only to answer, quite simply, "because you COULD do it" (Smiley 55), thereby demonstrating the source of his motivation as a sort of personal challenge that, without further investigation, preempts the possibility of qualification in terms of social utility or practical necessity. Operating from this vision, Dean concocts the idea to artificially induce pregnancy in cows in order to produce unending, calf-free lactation. This vision answers both to his personal obsession with cloning and his personal desire for money, because money, Dean believes, is "what [is] really best" (Smiley 122). Indeed, money is such an integral part of Dean's project that his girlfriend, Joy, begins to be haunted by "the picture in her mind of the cows AS money: green, falsely pregnant cows in a green field... like new dollar bills" (Smiley 95). Joy, a sympathetic character, imagines "All those cows with the same pattern of black and white... all feeling pregnant when they were not" and feels it is an image she cannot "hold in her head along with the rest of what she [knows] about life" (Smiley 96). Joy, as a sympathetic character, recognizes the need to integrate this project into life as she knows it. She cannot, because Dean has, in creating this project, no respect for life, which is figuratively represented by the fact that he is trying to make life, the life of the calves

which produce the cow's milk, an unnecessary impediment to the overwhelming concern for profit.

While Dean is not specifically depicted as a teacher, either good or bad, he, like Gift, nonetheless, demonstrates the negative manifestation of this scholarship in his apprehension of his work as an academic working in the university. Dean excels at what he calls "the research game," which he plays "purely for the love of it" (Smiley 122). His sense of research as a game reveals the degree to which Dean is actually catering to private fantasies rather than pursuing a scholarly objective. Playing the research game, Dean is able to make his "image of bovine paradise" into "gobs and gobs of dough" (Smiley 122). He so enjoys this that the game begins to overwhelm the work and he realizes with some trepidation that soon

he'd have to develop this herd of calf-free lactating Holsteins that he'd thought about so obsessively that he was now a bit bored with them. Soon they would devolve from potential money to real money, from an image... to years of probably laborious and discouraging work. Soon, in fact, he would have to once again call on the resources of his character that had been put on hiatus by the very exhilaration of this courtship... (Smiley 122)

Dean has proceeded with his project out of a sense of his potential success and the potential fortune that may accompany it, rather than with any realistic notion of what he is really trying to do, or why he should even be trying to do it. He is so narrowly focused that his desire for money even crowds out the vision that precipitated that desire and upon winning a large grant, he realizes



He [has] to renew his faith in calf-free lactation, faith that had faded another degree with every step toward realization. These days calves looked GOOD to him. How else could a farmer so cheaply replenish his herd? What farmer would go for a life of dairying without calves? But he had to embrace...those Holsteins anyway, without reservation...He soothed his doubts with the same arguments he would use to soothe [those financing him]...'Hey, marketing is YOUR end, I'm just here for the technical breakthroughs.' All things considered, it was easier to perfect his program. (Smiley 218)

As soon as Dean's vision transcends the hypothetical stage, and, through the investment of corporate money, becomes viable as a project, he is confronted by a reality he has not until this moment fully considered: the project itself. This proves the degree to which money has operated as Dean's prime motivation in initially pursuing his vision, an irony that only finds full expression in his admission that now money has become the only reason to continue with it. His work, therefore, exists for him most importantly as a hypothetical idea pursuant of a materialistic end, never as a potential or practical good. This is despite the fact that his project now has the means to become a reality. Thus, Dean, like Gift, takes a vision that speaks to his private obsessions and compulsions and maneuvers himself into a position from which he can make it a reality and thereby inflict it on the world at large without ever once considering his responsibility to that world or his project's viability within it.

This lack of responsibility is manifested in Dean's private life as well as his public life and his lack of commitment in his failed marriage is specifically linked to his inability

to commit even to his research. Furthermore, Dean's insensitivity in the domestic sphere portends his insensitivity to the needs and/or desires of anyone outside himself. When he first gets the idea of his bovine paradise, he becomes so excited that he leaves his two year old son home alone to go to the lab. Later, he is so self-centred and self-obsessed that he is unable, despite evidence, to perceive his girlfriend Joy's impending nervous breakdown. When she resorts to actually screaming insensibly in rejection of his plans for a herd of falsely pregnant cows, he considers this conduct unfair to him. He thinks to himself, "with all this pressure from the grant, and all the work he had to do, for her to give in to these emotional displays. It was really a way of sabotaging his work" (Smiley 297). Dean considers the world around him only as it manages to serve or impede his own work and concerns. He has no community awareness, even though his work is conceived and will be conducted in the larger world. Smiley makes it clear that as an academic, Dean thrives because he is not impeded by any awareness of social responsibility beyond his commitment as an academic to himself. This narrow-minded pursuit may allow Dean to thrive in the confines of his personal space, but it ultimately proves him a failure in any larger communal sense.

Dr. Bo Jones and Professor Timothy Monahan also demonstrate characteristics consistent with this type of narrowness and dangerous self-regard. Jones is so obsessed with hogs that he is basically incapable of conducting a conversation that does not revolve around them, even in the social atmosphere of a party. Jones "is not to be turned from his favorite subject" (Smiley 49), and he regularly inhibits conversation while the people around him try "to develop some interest in, and feeling for, the information they had just been given about hogs" (Smiley 50). Despite this obsession, however, Jones cannot even

maintain interest in his own projects concerning hogs and his scholarship is more fairly represented by the narrowness and compulsive nature of his party conversation rather than the concentration his obsessive nature might imply. That is, although Jones finds adequate personal reason to set up an expensive project in the middle of the university without consent, he does not maintain enough interest to follow through with the project and is absent while it takes effect.<sup>9</sup> Catering exclusively to his own interests, Jones cannot even be bothered to deal with the community of the university itself, and he runs up expenses that amount to a reported \$233, 876.42, at a time when the university budget is being cut so drastically the administration is charging instructors for photocopying. Meanwhile, Timothy Monahan is a self-obsessed teacher of creative writing, with similarly bad party manners. Looking to seduce a new colleague, he imagines that his problem is "that his fame didn't penetrate here, and so couldn't work in his favor" (Smiley 50). Monahan is obsessed with forwarding his own reputation and works at the university as a means of further accomplishing this as his goal. He thinks of his job as "an enviable [one]" (Smiley 15) and recites to himself figures that keep his envy in check and his vanity in bloom:

The advertisement that had attracted his application eight years before had attracted 213 other, unsuccessful applications. Seventy-two from writers who had one book, as he had, twelve from writers with two books. These

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Jones sets out to discover "how big [a hog] might grow if allowed to eat at will for all of his natural life span" (Smiley 6). This, again, is a project that demonstrates no apparent use outside of satisfying Jones' personal interest, and one that specifically taxes the system that supports it. But Jones quickly loses interest in this project and leaves the country without regard for how this specific experiment is advancing or how it, in fact, turns out.

were the figures he was always cognizant of, never mentioned, but also never forgot. (Smiley 15)

As a teacher, he takes it as a point of pride that he never returns to campus "more than twelve hours before the beginning of his first class," imagining that "his profession as a novelist... [gives] him that kind of leeway for eccentricity" (Smiley 14). In his vanity and cultivated eccentricity, Monahan is a selfish man largely incapable of overriding his own concerns for those of others, and over the course of his novel he finds himself increasingly alienated from everyone around him. But his understanding of himself is so stunted that, in teaching his students to be creative writers, he knows only to train them to behave like himself. He instructs his students to eavesdrop, because "eavesdropping is a habit fiction writers get into," explaining, "fiction writing will lead you into a number of socially unacceptable practices" (Smiley 28), thereby encouraging his students to not only be outsiders, but to congratulate themselves for being so, even as he himself begins to feel the negative consequences of his own alienation.

While it may be argued that the university can hardly be responsible for the eccentric behaviour of a handful of its academics, it is clear in the context of Smiley's book that the university supports and rewards this behaviour in specific contrast to academics who are more socially responsible. Dr. Gift is "quite famous," has "won teaching awards" and is "the highest-paid faculty member" (Smiley 203), while Dean's success at the research game garners him a grant worth \$400 000, money that he understands will "accrue[] to his reputation, his stature at the university, [and] his raise for next year" (Smiley 95). And, although not specifically supported by the university, Dr. Jones is able to pursue his scholarship without being interfered with, so much so that

the university literally has no idea what he is up to.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, a character like Joy (who in specific contrast to Dean, attempts to reconcile his project with "what she [knows] about life" (Smiley 96), and when she cannot, is disturbed and troubled by the image it represents), is, in some respects, betrayed by the university. Joy is in charge of the equine management program and the university horse herd. She loves horses and is committed both to her work with the animals and to her work as a teacher. But, due to drastic cutbacks, the equine management program is cancelled and Joy is transferred from what she considers her life work to "the Large Animal Hospital, where she would be taking care of patients, mostly equine, but some bovine" (Smiley 374). Joy is bitterly disappointed by this development and, most importantly, her pain is not alleviated by the university's promise that she will "suffer no cut in pay." Indeed, her bitterness is fully expressed in her frustration that "that was what she was supposed to focus on, no cut in pay" (Smiley 374). The fact that this appeasement does not alleviate her sense of loss demonstrates that, in specific contrast to both Gift and Dean, Joy's sense of her work is not based on monetary gain, and her sense of personal success is independent of it. Achievement, for Joy, is to be found in her herd of horses, a community of its own and one of which she is an integral part. Her care and interest in this community, such as it is, demonstrates her humane nature and evaluation of the concerns of life over the concerns of capital. Similarly, Chairman X is a character who takes great pride in his social conscience and is instrumental in putting a stop to Dr. Gift's plan to dig a gold mine under

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<sup>10</sup> Monahan is a more ambiguous character because he grows across the course of the novel and becomes aware of the negative effects of his alienation. In this knowledge, he suffers a fate more consistent with the socially conscious characters because he fails to get his promotion. But (since he has developed out of his overriding concern for his reputation), this failure does not mean what it once would have to him, and he is

the last primeval cloud forest. Chairman of the horticulture department, X is a political idealist, opposed to the rampant capitalism of our society and increasingly endorsed by the university. He came to his career "hopeful and well-meaning, always expecting people to come to their senses and devote their means and their lives selflessly to the common good" (Smiley 365). This innocence is figuratively represented in his life's work at the university, the cultivation of an enormous garden, a garden that is placed in a central location in the university in hopes of specifically enriching the lives of those around it, and which eventually is destroyed due to cutbacks. Like Joy's, Chairman X's sense of social responsibility is not valued and his work is not rewarded but destroyed by the university. He is forced to watch while

The dump truck[s]... wheels spun... and found purchase in the most valuable thing Chairman X had ever produced--a whole world of fertility ... Chairman X liked to think of it as a many-chambered mansion sheltering an unknowable variety of life-forms that worked away in the darkness outside all attempts of the human mind to classify, simplify, objectify. Now he watched as knobby tire treads rumbled over countless spots that he and his helpers had never dared to step on... (Smiley 365)

Unlike the socially irresponsible academics at Moo U., Chairman X's work is life-affirming and places the value of life above the value of the human mind to "classify, simplify [and] objectify" it. Chairman X's work has an obvious place in the larger community and his work seeks to reaffirm the principles of life that govern the

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more concerned with his personal failures as a man, demonstrating, in the context of the novel, his continuing potential for growth.

community at large as well as those that answer to his personal interests and concerns. Perhaps inevitably, such orientation makes his place in the university less secure than those who reflect the concerns of capital over the concerns of life.

Without fully compromising her critique, and, most likely in the interest of pursuing a comic ending, Smiley allows these cutbacks to be repealed, however, and their potential effects off-set.<sup>11</sup> Although in a less hospitable location, Chairman X begins to work on a new garden and "urge[s] [his students] to accept the unpromising nature of this site as a challenge" (Smiley 397), proving his courage and relevance as a man and as a teacher. And though, presumably, Joy gets her program back,<sup>12</sup> and other responsible professors are glad to hear that their classes will shrink back to manageable size, the comedic finale of the book is nonetheless somewhat misleading in its tone. For, while the book concludes on the high-note of the marriage of Chairman X (and his telling movement away from domestic unrest into domestic success), the sudden influx of money that allows the university community to participate in this comedic necessity comes from the invention of Loren Stroop. Stroop has invented a super agricultural machine that should "revolutionize American agriculture" (Smiley 390). Working alone and in the interest of farmers like himself, Stroop has spent his life-time trying to keep any notion of

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<sup>11</sup> Smiley's critique is not fully compromised, but it is to a degree. Her criticism is still in place by the end of the novel and the full ramifications of the novel's conclusion have, actually, very dire ramifications. However, the comic resolution does off-set this criticism in tone and the reader is lured into believing in the novel's happier resolutions. This is evidenced by the critical response to the book that often emphasizes the spirit of the novel's comic charm at the expense of its more serious social commentary. For example, Adam Begley, sensing that Smiley "doesn't want to spoil her good time by digging up the worst about any of her characters" ("Decline" 43), concludes that "*Moo* has a slightly unreal, hedonistic quality, a wishful celebration of the pleasures of university life, pleasures that should go hand in hand with security, a little money, and good company nearby" ("Decline" 44).

<sup>12</sup> Joy's loss is not specifically redressed in the book. This may have been unnecessary as the overall reversal is clearly meant to apply to the university in general, or it may have been a purposeful omission in the interest of perpetuating an ominous undertone to the comic resolution.

these plans from the big agricultural companies, but, by leaving them to the university he has "unknowingly... relinquished his remarkable invention to the very enemy he has always feared" (Nakadate 198). It is implied that the university will exploit his invention for profit (the very profit that allows the comic reversal) and use it against rather than for the interest of the common farmer. Indeed, Smiley's novel is a criticism first of the capitalist ethic that places the individual above the community and stands, in many ways, as a sort of lament for the demise of the university as a social institution. She laments the idea that

Associations of mutual interest between the university and the corporations were natural, inevitable, and widely accepted. According to the state legislature, they were to be actively pursued. The legislature, in fact, was already counting the "resources" that could be "allocated" elsewhere in state government when corporations began picking up more of the tab for higher education, so success in finding this money would certainly convince them that further experiments in driving the university into the arms of the private sector would be warranted, that actually paying for the university out of state funds was irresponsible... (Smiley 22)

Smiley charges that driving the university into the arms of the private sector is a regrettable possibility and one being currently and increasingly pursued by the university's privileging of academics such as Dr. Gift and Jellinek over those like Joy and Chairman X. Such a movement into increasingly private and therefore interested fields



prevents the university from acting *as* a social institution and threatens to turn students into customers and scholarship into free corporate research.

Both *Textermination* and *Moo* create scenarios in which the university's failure to appeal and answer to the public good will actually and finally overwhelm the very nature of the institution and change it for the worse, possibly forever. These novels demonstrate the dangerous reality of the estrangement between the university and the larger community both in their explicit content and in their implicit failings. While Brooke-Rose's novel is compromised by being too privately focused on the academy and too professionalized in its language and allusive content, Smiley risks a satire that is too broad, trafficking in exaggerated stereotypes, and easing into a disarming resolution. In its own way, the discrepancy between these two novels, therefore, suggests that the divide between the professionalized elite and the reading public has become so substantial that the issue of their estrangement can no longer even be addressed in the same language, and attempts at reconciliation or reunion end up typifying the problem even as they try to resolve it. This is a problem of some gravity as it suggests that the problem has developed perhaps beyond the university's capacity to solve it. Just as humanities departments are much more severely threatened by the possibility of an illiterate public, and corporate interests become more threatening once they override communal concerns, the university is in danger of evolving importantly, and perhaps permanently, away from its role as a social institution. This is unacceptable most significantly because of the potential power inherent in disinterested academic investigation, investigation constituted to be something other than fodder for corporate interests or the consequence of current trends. If, in the current state of crisis, the university has lost its sense of itself and of its

purpose, perhaps it is only by returning to its most fundamental responsibilities that it may regain them. For in the context of all that cannot be definitively known and absolutely understood, perhaps there can be agreement on the importance of the preservation and the continuation of knowledge and thought, and the responsibility this preservation and continuation entails. This is work which, in its best manifestations, is performed on behalf of, and for the benefit of, society, work which communicates what it is that academics *can* discover and *do* know back to a public that might even care to listen.

Conclusion -- It's *Nice Work* if you can get it, and you can get it if you try.

David Lodge's novel *Nice Work* is the third in a trilogy of novels that includes *Changing Places* and *Small World*. A trilogy in some respects, the three novels are only loosely related, with their principal overlap being the recurring characters of Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp (who are primary characters only in the first novel) and the recurring setting of the University of Rummidge. *Nice Work*, as Lodge asserts, is a "more sober and realistic novel than its carnivalesque precursors" (*Practice* 34) and it centres on a new character to the trilogy, Robyn Penrose, an eager and idealistic young scholar who is working as Dean's Relief at Rummidge through Swallow's three-year tenure. Using Robyn as his focal point in this novel, Lodge touches upon many of the issues already raised throughout this study, including the state of competition in (specifically) American universities, the mishandling of the university as a pseudo-corporation, the influence of theory in present-day scholarship, and the responsibility of the university to the society that supports it.

Competition, as a force that has overbalanced all other scholarly ideals, is depicted as a particularly American phenomenon in *Nice Work*. Lodge suggests that this is because the British universities of the time (the novel is set in 1986) were being ravaged by Government cuts, and did not, as a result, have the luxury to think of anything else. In *Nice Work*, American universities are envied in the British system for their relative

prosperity, but dreaded for the hostility that distinguishes their departmental relations.<sup>1</sup>

When Robyn is offered a job in the States, Swallow dutifully warns her:

American academic life is red in tooth and claw. Suppose you get the job -- the struggle only begins. You've got to keep publishing to justify your appointment. When the time comes for your tenure review, half your colleagues will be trying to stab you in the back, and not speaking to the other half. (Lodge 878)

The prospect of competing in this environment is something that Robyn considers only because the degeneration of the British system leaves her feeling that she "[has] no choice" (Lodge 878). It is certainly not an option that she finds attractive and at the first opportunity she decides instead to stay in the beleaguered British system.

The British universities are suffering so conspicuously in contrast to the rich, privately-funded American universities, because of drastic government cutbacks in their funding. Margaret Thatcher is named as the one responsible for this new government policy, but she is not held up as the evil mastermind in the novel. Instead, the point is clearly made that Thatcher is succeeding at decimating the university system in England because "she is riding the *Zeitgeist*" (Lodge 836). As Lodge depicts it, the principal problem facing the university is one of misunderstanding, on both a federal and a more widely social level. Federally, the misunderstanding is centred in a misapprehension of the university's basic structure, a misapprehension mirrored in the conflict between the

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<sup>1</sup> The distinct nature of the American system versus the British system is, of course, a popular theme throughout the trilogy. In *Small World*, Siegfried Mews notes that "America is negatively depicted as a ruthless society governed by the law of the survival of the fittest and given to uncritical adoration of efficiency and technical progress at the cost of humanitarian considerations" (716).

academic and corporate worlds which underlies the novel. Philip Swallow, as the head of the English department, explains to the visiting industrialist, Vic Wilcox:

I'm nobody's boss. I'm afraid you're making the same mistake as the Government...supposing that our universities are organized like businesses, with a clear division between management and labour, whereas in fact they're collegiate institutions. That's why the whole business of the cuts has been such a balls-up...when the Government cut our funding they obviously hoped to improve efficiency, get rid of overmanning, and so on, like they did in industry. Well, let's admit that there was room for some of that -- it would be a miracle if there hadn't been. But in industry, management decides who shall be made redundant in the labour force...Universities don't have that pyramid structure. Everybody is equal in a sense, once they pass probation. Nobody can be made redundant against their will...Everybody recognizes that there have to be cuts, because the Government controls the purse-strings, but nobody will actually make them. (Lodge 864-5)

The university has been unable to respond adequately to the cuts because the cuts presuppose something about the nature of the universities that is essentially false. And, however pressing financial concerns become, the solution cannot be to change the university to better reflect the premises behind the cuts, because such a move would, by definition, destroy what distinguishes the university as an institution. The solution

instead is to better inform the public, legislators and laymen, as to the essential nature of the university and the reason for its being.<sup>2</sup>

Lodge makes it clear that theoretical sophistication is partly to blame for the breakdown in communication between the university and the society at large, and he uses practical concerns to question the utility of theory just as Bradbury does in *Mensonge*.

After detailing Robyn's poststructuralist sensibilities, the narrator declares,

but in practice this doesn't seem to affect her behaviour very noticeably -- she seems to have ordinary human feelings, ambitions, desires, to suffer anxieties, frustrations, fears, like anyone else in this imperfect world, and to have a natural inclination to try and make it a better place. (Lodge 609)

Robyn's theoretical commitments are nonetheless very important to her, and Lodge makes her look slightly ridiculous at times in her allegiance to them. For example, when Robyn declares to Vic Wilcox that "There's no such thing [as love]... It's a rhetorical device. It's a bourgeois fallacy," while admitting that, when she was younger, she "allowed [her]self to be constructed by the discourse of romantic love for a while" (Lodge 820), she does not strike either the reader or Vic as philosophically persuasive, but conflicted and defensively naïve. However, Robyn is neither close-minded nor insensible and she allows her beliefs to be questioned by her interaction with Vic Wilcox's basically unsympathetic mind. She admits that she finds herself

falling back on arguments that I don't really believe any more, like the importance of maintaining cultural tradition, and improving students'

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<sup>2</sup> This will be explored further in discussion of the Utopic vision of the university offered by Robyn who, at this point in the novel, declares hotly: "Give me the university, with all its faults, any day" (Lodge 865).

communicative skills -- arguments that old fogies like Philip Swallow trot out at the drop of a hat. Because if I said we teach students about the perpetual sliding of the signified under the signifier, or the way every text inevitably undermines its own claim to a determinate meaning, he would laugh in my face. (Lodge 757)

Robyn allows the utility of her theoretical stance to be questioned and the questions she admits are viable challenges to the uncompromising nature of some theoretical positions. However, Lodge is not unsympathetic to poststructuralist theory, and his characterization of it in *Nice Work* allows for a middle ground unexplored in either *Mensonge* or *Book*. By acknowledging the good intentions of Robyn and the essential value of some of the advancements made by this new way of thinking and the challenges it embodies to scholars about language and thought, Lodge allows Robyn a dignity and her ideas a validity in the wider context of the novel. Thus, Robyn is able to teach Wilcox about the difference between metaphor and metonymy and the implied sub-text of cigarette ads. She is able to interest him in reading and successfully convinces him to regard language as something other than a totally dependable and innocent reflection of intent, and with her success, she has reason to conclude that, in fact, it "was wrong to say that we shouldn't teach theory to students who haven't read anything. It's a false opposition" (Lodge 874). But, while Robyn ultimately sticks to her theoretical principles, her student, in his education, finds the means to challenge her, asking her, when she tries to defend the integrity of her rejection of him: "I thought it was impossible to mean what we say or say what we mean... I thought there was always a slippage between the I that speaks and the I that is spoken of..." (Lodge 879). Vic's stubborn challenges are ultimately given as

much validity in the text as Robyn's theoretical principles and they are both made to look ridiculous and righteous in proportion to one another.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while Lodge is certainly critical of Robyn's theoretical allegiances, he makes room for the continued presence, and the validity, of both ways of thinking, the traditional and the theoretical, and argues against the absolute dominance of either one.

The spirit of this compromise echoes one of the most important aspects of *Nice Work*, which floats in at the novel's conclusion as a t-shirt slogan lifted from E.M. Forster: "ONLY CONNECT" (Lodge 895). The problem, as it is characterized in this novel, is the failure of each side to apprehend, and connect with, the nature of the other, a problem that is cultivated by the ability of each side to exist without any real knowledge of the other. In Lodge's universe, ignorance breeds antagonism, while knowledge ensures tolerance and sympathy. "Lodge seems less intent on showing 'the' truth and exploding error than on enlarging the bounds of human sympathy" (Moseley 99). This is most

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<sup>3</sup> Eva Lambertsson Björk disagrees, asserting that Lodge chooses, in Robyn, "the worn-out stereotype of the academic woman" (129). On the strength of her rejection of this stereotype, Björk argues that "the gap between the academy and the outside world is in *Nice Work*... portrayed as unbridgeable and the reason for this state of affairs is explained as being mainly due to the academy's fascination with irrelevant, even dangerously radical views on life, such as 'feminism,' which cannot be applied outside its walls" (130). It seems curious to call feminism "dangerously radical," or to suggest that Lodge might think it has no place outside the university, but Lodge's satirizing of Robyn's theoretical allegiances tends to encourage opposition that is, in its formulation, as biased as it then suggests Lodge is. (While this may seem to manifest the very same unbridgeable gap to which Björk refers, there is a middle ground to be found in criticism on the novel.) Terry Eagleton argues that while "Wilcox turns out to be honest, sensitive and intelligent, the stereotype of the sexually independent woman remains on the whole unchallenged" (100). This assessment is rooted in Eagleton's rejection of Lodge's "answer to the system [that] lies with the individual, and other such liberal banalities" (101). But Eagleton's claim that "sex... is a major theme" (98) of the novel and that Robyn comes off as "a frigid bluestocking" that "repress[es] [her] whole affair" (100) with Vic are claims that are not supported by the text. Instead, it is my contention that while Lodge is satirizing Robyn, he characterizes her and her views sympathetically, and he suggests that the gap between the academy and the outside world is bridgeable, as evidenced by Robyn's dogged idealism and by "the purely personal friendship" (as Björk terms it) between Robyn and Vic. Indeed, it seems more reasonable to imagine that while "Lodge appears to relish showing the inconsistencies between the proclamations of Robyn's professional life and her private behaviour" (Martin 59), "the novel comes off as more critical of



obviously characterized by the Shadow Scheme which functions as the catalyst in the text. Robyn Penrose is sent by the university to "shadow" Vic Wilcox in his work in the industrial sector in Rummidge in order to counteract the "widespread feeling in the country that universities are 'ivory tower' institutions, whose staff are ignorant of the realities of the modern commercial world" (Lodge 645). Of course, what becomes immediately clear once the Shadow Scheme gets started is that Robyn is, in fact, hopelessly uninformed about the realities of the commercial world, just as Vic is unacquainted with the function or purpose of the university. Their relationship is a process of enlightenment for them both and functions to break them out of their narrow existences, and demonstrate to them the degree to which they, and the people around them, are ignorant and sheltered in their tight corners of the world.<sup>4</sup> Robyn begins to think of her trips across town as excursions into territory unexplored by people like her, and she admits that

[the factory] itself seemed a shadowland, the dark side of Rummidge, unknown to those who basked in the light of culture and learning at the University. Of course, to the people who worked at Pringle's, the reverse was true: the University and all it stood for was in shadow -- alien, inscrutable, vaguely threatening. Flitting backwards and forwards across the frontier between these two zones... Robyn felt like a secret agent, and

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the academic world than of business and industry...because Lodge has known and scrutinized that world much longer" (Martin 61).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it is a sign of the novel's success that critics disagree as to which character is more edified by the experience. Merritt Moseley suggests that it is Vic who "moves even more than Robyn" because "he almost never reads, when the book begins" (97-8) while Bernard Bergonzi asserts that "it is Robyn who has to do the greater share of learning...[because] she has never been in a factory" (25).

as secret agents are apt to do, suffered occasional spasms of doubt about the righteousness of her own side. (Lodge 756)

Robyn's relationship with Vic and her exposure to all he represents has her questioning the practicality of what she does, not just for herself and those like her, but for the society at large. In a conversation with her scholar-partner, her doubts are voiced, and echoing Vic's sentiments, Robyn asks, "Why should society pay to be told people don't mean what they say or say what they mean?" (Lodge 757). Her partner's response, "Because it's true," functions to reaffirm the validity of the question rather than answer it, because, as Robyn counters, "I thought there was no such thing as truth, in the absolute sense" (Lodge 758). Indeed, the persistent practicality of this challenge leads them both to an impasse and Charles' territorial defense is finally the most telling, as he closes down the conversation by asking "Whose side are you on, Robyn?" (Lodge 758). Robyn's doubts are seen as disloyal in an environment that does not dare question itself too deeply for fear of losing its already tenuous grasp on a sense of purpose. But, clearly, these are questions that need to be asked, and that need to be asked from both inside and outside the university community.

Indeed, Robyn's exposure to and acknowledgement of a world outside the university becomes the most interesting aspect of the novel. After being raised in an academic family, Robyn has practiced the absolute immersion in her subject that her education has required. Thus, Vic Wilcox is literally Robyn's first exposure to the larger world and to a world that is not pre-disposed to be cognizant of or congenial to the university scene. This causes her to question herself and her beliefs in a way that she has never been called upon to do before. But, ultimately, the questions are not as threatening

as they first seem. Lodge depicts the university community as one floundering from budget cuts and sensing itself as under siege from an unsympathetic public, but these questions do not ultimately erode Robyn's self-confidence; instead they place it more distinctly inside the context of her beliefs. Robyn is called upon to answer Vic's challenges, and, in the end, she is successful inasmuch as she affirms her belief in the larger significance of the university and retains her own idealism concerning the place of the university in society. However romantic her assertion that "Universities are the cathedrals of the modern age. They shouldn't have to justify their existence by utilitarian criteria" (Lodge 777), this assertion stands as evidence of her real passion regarding the university and her conviction that the work of the university is worthwhile. While this idealism may be unsatisfactory as a practical answer to a practical problem, Robyn believes the university's poor relations with the public arise not from the intrinsic nature of the university, but from some more correctable problems to do with representation. She asserts, "the trouble is, ordinary people don't understand what they're about, and the universities don't explain themselves to the community" (Lodge 777). This statement, both optimistic and realistic, reflects more or less the final import of Lodge's novel. The value of the university is inimitable; the problem is the degree to which scholars inside the university, and, as a result, the community outside the university, have lost touch with its importance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ian Carter in his discussion of *Nice Work* is disappointed by this ending. Although he recognizes Lodge as "the brightest and best of British university novelists still writing" (256), he laments that Lodge simply "restates the Victorian debate about culture and utility, [and] ends with each still in its own box. Better mutual understanding is all for which we can hope" (Carter 256). Conversely, Robert S. Burton asserts that "it is a testament to Lodge's honesty that *Nice Work*, finally, resists easy solutions to the sharp differences between town and gown and the division of labor that underscores those differences" (241).

What becomes one of the most important aspect of the novel, therefore, is its idealism, and this idealism represents a new evolution in the sub-genre of the university novel. If novels like *Lucky Jim* and *The History Man* encourage critics to dismiss the sub-genre on the basis of its bitter rejection and often scathing critique of university life, then Robyn represents something new. In 1985, Angela Hague wrote that the university novel "often depict[s] the university as a corrupt institution ruled by despicable teachers and questioning the value--and possibility--of a university education" (172). She declares that the university novel "appears to be a study in self-hate and self-castigation, an attempted exorcism of the doubts and fears of the inhabitants of the academy" (Hague 173).<sup>6</sup> *Nice Work*, quite simply, cannot be included as an example of this. Robyn, although she is often naïve, and sometimes slightly ridiculous, is more notably well-meaning, hard-working, and idealistic. She is working on her second book, and is "a popular and conscientious teacher, whose optional courses on women's writing [are] oversubscribed. She perform[s] her share of administrative duties efficiently" (Lodge 619), and is looking to make important contributions to the university community. This goal is motivated by her naked desire to work in the university, such that all other options become second-rate compromises away from her real, recognized, purpose in life. She is plaintive in her rejection of having to pursue any other lifestyle, and states frankly, "I

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<sup>6</sup> I am using Hague's criticisms of the university novel as representative ones; she is not alone in her assessments. In 1992, Ellen Leiman wrote that many university novels "present the stereotypical university professor as a befuddled, chalk-covered, impotent, drunken, and/or intellectually fraudulent male" (39), while, in 1993, Eva Lambertsson Björk affirmed "the truth" that university novels "do little or nothing to alter the university as an isolated community peopled mainly by pathetic clowns" (9). Eagleton in his review of *Nice Work* argues similarly that, in the English university novel, "Intellectuals are seen as faintly sinister figures, bohemian and nonconformist, treasonable clerks whose heartless celebrations pose a threat to the unreflective pieties of ordinary life. But they are also pathetically ineffectual characters--crumpled figures of fun pursuing their ludicrous abstractions at a remote distance from the bustle of daily life" (93).

don't want to run a shoe shop or live in the Algarve... I want to teach women's studies and poststructuralism and the nineteenth-century novel and write books about them" (Lodge 729). At "twelve thousand a year" (Lodge 729), this ambition is recognized as one that cannot be motivated by money, and considering the current state of the university, prestige is not, apparently, a motivating factor either. What does, most clearly, motivate Robyn is a Utopic vision of the university that, as she admits, speaks not to its present state of being, but its intrinsic potential. She imagines being able to free the workers at Vic's factory from their dire working conditions and she "transports them, in her imagination, to the campus" (Lodge 866). She imagines a scene in which

... the beautiful young people [of the university] and their teachers stopped dallying and disputing and got to their feet and came forward to greet the people from the factory, shook their hands and made them welcome, and a hundred small seminar groups formed on the grass, composed half of students and lecturers and half of workers and managers, to exchange ideas on how the values of the university and the imperatives of commerce might be reconciled and more equitably managed to the benefit of the whole of society. (Lodge 867)

This is a kind of group Shadow Scheme that Robyn imagines, in which student and lecturer, worker and manager are able to meet on equal footing in a congenial setting in order to explore what they have to offer one another. These sentiments emphasize the idealism in Robyn's desire to protect the unique nature of the university and her unwillingness to see it compromised, and suggest that her defense of the collegiate nature of the institution and the tenure system that protects academic freedom springs from real

beliefs and convictions and not just from a need for self-protection. That is, Robyn does not defend the university simply because of a simple, self-serving desire to protect her livelihood, but, more importantly, she chooses to live her life inside the university *because of* the values and principles it embodies. She is not simply defending her position; she is positioning herself according to a certain set of ideals. Thus, it is made clear that Robyn's desire to stay in the beleaguered British university system instead of leaving to pursue what would be the more prestigious appointment in San Francisco is specifically motivated by her Utopic vision of the university and her desire to actively work toward it.<sup>7</sup> Working toward this vision is something she recognizes as worth doing, and this is, in the novel, the definition of "nice work." The novel concludes with her decision to stay on and pursue this work to the best of her ability.

In *Nice Work*, therefore, Lodge does not demonstrate the "self-hate and self-castigation" (173) Hague identifies as a distinguishing feature of the university novel, nor does his novel bring into question "the value...[or] possibility of a university education" (Hague 172). Instead, the critique of the university system offered in *Nice Work* is balanced by a clearly defined idealism regarding the place and function of the university in society today. To varying degrees, this idealism is also evident in the other nine

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<sup>7</sup> I disagree with Burton here who insists that Robyn's vision "is quickly dismissed as a daydream" (241). He argues that the final "more ominous vision" that concludes the novel suggests the impossibility of Robyn's more idealistic hopes. But it is this final vision that solidifies Robyn in her idealistic purpose and in her resolve to stay in the British system in order to work toward it as a pursuable goal. Martin similarly qualifies the importance of Robyn's vision by emphasizing that it is "largely futile" (65), but he concedes, I think rightly, that it finds a productive outlet in her behaviour when she "encourages Vic's wife to enroll in an Open University course and advises his daughter on university admission" (65). Indeed, it is important to note that Robyn is not grappling with a sense of futility at the end of the book, rather she is renewing her resolve: "Robyn Penrose decides to 'stay on' in England rather than emigrate, because although she can see that there is 'a long way to go' towards solving the problems of contemporary Britain, she believes that there is more to be gained by facing them than by putting them behind her" (Acheson 91).

university novels discussed herein and together amounts to a clear evolution in the university novel since Hague's discussion of the main features of the sub-genre in 1985.<sup>8</sup> All ten of the books discussed in this study recognize the essential value of a university education and lament primarily the existence of those inside the university who have lost touch with this value (a distinction that most of the authors identify as that which distinguishes a good scholar from a bad one). Indeed, contrary to the popular conceptions of the limitations of the university novel, there are scholars in these novels that are hard-working, well-intentioned and basically idealistic (if disillusioned) participants in the university scene. There are good teachers, devoted scholars, and proponents of the purpose and value of literature and education, and most of the novels conclude idealistically, suggesting fictional means for forwarding a clearer sense of the purpose of the university.

In *Swann*, Sarah Maloney is a popular teacher who takes inspiration from her seminars that are "charged and expectant and nippy with intelligence" (Shields 7). She is an enthusiastic scholar whose, at times, dominating sense of competition is balanced by her genuine love of Mary Swann's poetry and sense of herself as Swann's "watchwoman, her literary executor, her defender and loving caretaker" (Shields 32). Morton Jimroy, a more neurotic and less sympathetic character, is also importantly, if only partially,

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<sup>8</sup> Adam Begley also notes this development in the sub-genre, but, in a peculiar contrast to those that disparage the university novel for its negativity, Begley laments what he calls sarcastically "the era of the kinder, gentler campus satire" (40). In an article on *Straight Man* and *Moo*, Begley waxes nostalgic, instead, for Mary McCarthy's "reckless savage[ry]" and Randall Jarrell's "nast[iness]" (40). While, when writing about what he calls "the Postmodern, Postdoctoral Romance" (36) (which includes *Possession* and *Swann*), he clearly states his impatience with "Byatt and company [who] insist upon the magical properties of scholarship, the peculiar obsessiveness required to live for knowledge in a dumbed-down world" (36). Begley seems to prefer criticism that is harsh and uncompromising and disillusionment that is untempered by even only lingering hopes.

redeemed by his belief in and service to what he considers the redemptive power of poetry. He admits that Swann's poems "rescued him from emotional bankruptcy" (Shields 103) and finds his only true joy in his work, in "set[ting] his thoughts adrift on the scholarly sea" (Shields 105). The novel ends idealistically by stressing this function of the critic. Shields conspires to bring all the academics together in the common purpose of saving Mary Swann's poetry from the obsolescence to which Brownie's (and potentially Willard Lang's) greed threatens to condemn it. Shields removes the scholars from the more critically sophisticated and competitive atmosphere of the literary conference and has them gathered in common purpose in a hotel room where "... each of them..., for the moment at least, [is able to] transcend... personal concerns" (396).

In *Possession*, Byatt clearly privileges the sensibilities of her "old-fashioned textual scholar[s]" (51), Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, over scholars with either a biographical bent (which she depicts as a function of competitive acquisitiveness) or a clear theoretical allegiance (which she suggests is more a function of the desire to be fashionable rather than the desire for knowledge). Roland is attracted to "the movement of Ash's mind" (Byatt 21), while Maud admits she "rather deplore[s] the modern feminist attitude toward private lives" (Byatt 211). Maud furthermore feels sympathy for Beatrice Nest in her scholarship when Beatrice admits that she wonders if the subject of her studies, Ellen Ash "would have liked what [she] was doing," admitting that "[she] [felt] responsible... To her" (Byatt 221). A sort of justice is provided for Maud, Roland and Beatrice's subjects as a result of their scruples and Christabel's wish that her poem will be saved in the hands of "some discerning reader" (Byatt 501) is granted by Maud in her function, not only as Christabel's heir, but also, importantly, as a critic who recognizes the



literary value of Christabel's achievement as a poet. Byatt's novel closes with Maud and Roland coming together, surrounded by "the smell of bitten apples" (507), a smell that bespeaks the triumph of knowledge, and though Byatt's epilogue establishes the fact that no knowledge can ever be absolute or complete, it is this resolute desire for knowledge that allows her protagonists to find both personal and professional success.

In Russo's *Straight Man*, Hank Devereaux, though he has misgivings about his place in the university and his desire to be a part of it, is a conscientious and effective teacher. He objects to Finny's desire to lighten his workload by encouraging students to drop his course, and criticizes his father for avoiding "the expectant faces of his students" (Russo 215) and teaching them the value of a stridently dismissive criticism over the value of great literature. Hank is an observant and principled teacher himself, and he attempts to teach his students the subtleties of persuasion and the wisdom of "doubt" (Russo 264), even though he fears the whole culture is working against him. Although Hank is often critical of the workings of the university and disillusioned by its present state, he objects forcefully to the mocking of "our institution of higher learning, [and] the life of the mind" (Russo 60) and holds to his ideals at the expense of his own self-advancement. When he is advised to sell out his colleagues, in order to ensure his position and potentially advance himself, despite the state of his relationship with most of them, he refuses to do so, and is forced to question more seriously his place in the embattled institution rather than reaffirm it. At the end of the novel, a sense of community is restored as a group of professors come together in the face of adversity for the first time and begin to recognize that "All we need to do is break the code" (Russo 391) of the problem that faces them. Russo argues symbolically for awareness and action

regarding the current state of the university in his novel's conclusion and suggests that it is only by coming together as a collective group in the besieged university environment that a resolution will be effected.

In *Japanese By Spring*, Reed focuses on the politically charged atmosphere of the university and uses a shift in the balance of power to expose the excesses of professors whose only interest has been to secure that power. The Japanese militants who overtake the university remind them of their duty to "Teach. That's what we hired you for..." (Reed 116) and put a stop to research designed to empower a select few rather than advance the common cause of knowledge. Tellingly, the most narrow-minded and biased professor in the novel, Professor Crabtree, is revolutionized by his forced removal from the blinded security of his own power base and by enforced exposure to those he has made it his habit to discredit. Sent to Africa, to learn Yoruba and read the literature he had felt fit to dismiss in the past, he returns to confess, "It was my stupid arrogance, my devotion to [false] standards that almost prevented me from embarking on this wonderful adventure... Learning a new language and a new world" (Reed 155). Reed uses Crabtree to demonstrate the transformative power of education, the enlightenment that learning generates. Crabtree comes to understand that he had quit learning, that he had been "depriving [his head] of intellectual nutrition" (Reed 155). With this transformation, Reed specifically forwards multiculturalism and the study of literatures and traditions outside of our own as the means toward enlightenment and the novel closes with the image of "a beautiful black butterfly with yellow spots" (Reed 225), an image that shows both the possibility and ultimate beauty of the contrast and convergence of different colours and traditions.

Due to the nature of his book, Bradbury's *Mensonge* posits a certain idealism regarding the place and purpose of education, but in negative, rather than positive, terms. Bradbury argues against what his character, Mensonge, stands for, arguing against it both as the "lie" his name suggests and the destruction his ideas promise. Bradbury rejects the suggestion that "we cannot refer to any *purpose* in the text, any authorial *intention*, any historical *causes* behind the book, any *meaning* in its argument, and *effect* it might have on others or oneself" (Bradbury 65), because such ideas amount to "the end of knowledge" (Bradbury 77). It can be argued, however, that although the book is largely negatively assertive, it ends positively, with a sort of idyllic vision that is comparable to the effect of the concluding visions of the other novels. Bradbury's book finishes with the observation that Mensonge's "great contribution... to the end of [knowledge]" (Bradbury 77) is, in his own more stringent fashion *sous rature*, and will, thanks to "a certain acid... auto-destruct" (Bradbury 93). Thus, Bradbury argues for the continued possibility of purpose, intention and meaning in their necessary relationship to knowledge and against the chaos that effectively discredits the possibility of knowing anything past the fact of not knowing anything at all.

In *Book*, the hero, Adam Snell, has a "reputation as a dynamic teacher" and is known, and feared, for his "quiet, unshakeable commitment to humanistic values" (Grudin 119). His book's "abundant creativity, [and] thunderous *joie de vivre*" (Grudin 120) are threatening to members of the department who consider "values, [and] relevance" (Grudin 147) to be antiquated notions. Older critics like Professors Adler, Marlin and Wallace who stick up for Snell and who argue with patience and knowledge are marginalized and/or dismissed by younger, theoretical critics who use political

correctness and self-righteous indignation to stifle any dissent in a way that is considered "medieval" (Grudin 134). In view of this conflict, *Book* ends idealistically on its own terms by separating these factions from one another and "restor[ing] the Department of English to strength as a body considering literature itself" (Grudin 227). Literature is restored to its primary place and as such creativity is considered once again to be valuable. Thus, Snell's "intellectual insight and integrity" (Grudin 227) are rewarded, while the theorists that had opposed him sink into their own self-made oblivion and in consequence without the intrinsic value of literature to support them. Thus, the present state of the department of English is depicted as problematic to the degree to which it has lost touch with its essential purpose and is restored by its ability to reconnect with that purpose and by recognizing the primary value of the study of literature.

A clear sense of idealism is more difficult to locate in *The Trick of It* as the reader's perspective is so completely delineated by Richard's own. There is, however, a kind of allegorical message to be inferred from Richard's steadily worsening state over the course of the novel. This is different from simply recognizing Richard's problem, however, for Frayn seems to take pains not to make Richard unsympathetic nor his writer-wife overly sympathetic in contrast to him. That is, Richard is not the critic/bad-guy and his wife the writer/good-guy. Instead, the import of the novel seems more reliably located in the potential source of Richard's problem, which lies in his education. Richard is more interesting as a representative figure, one that houses the essential contradiction in the figure of the critic. Richard embodies the neurosis due someone who is attracted to the study of literature by their love of books and by their sympathy with and reverence for created worlds but who, working as a critic, is called upon to distance

him/herself, and assume objective power over the artist and attempt, in some cases, to call into question and even to discredit those fictions. Frayn explores the untenable position of the critic who is asked to critique literature without being either subordinate or domineering, and thus, perhaps, he argues for a more conscientious and consciously articulated perspective for the critic, a perspective that allows for genuine admiration and effective criticism without encouraging the swing between the polarized opposites of subject and source, servant and superior, love and hate.

In *Textermination*, Christine Brooke-Rose argues in support of the power of literature and criticizes contemporary scholarship for its inability to represent that power to a public quickly losing interest in the written word. She holds up Kelly McFaddeon as a scholar intimidated by the critical sophistication of her betters, but who, once she is distracted from her desire to keep up and find herself worthy, discovers she is a good reader. As a good reader, Kelly identifies with characters in books and "lives" them (Brooke-Rose 25), while as a good scholar, Rita Humboldt's relationship with literature is reductive, pragmatic and utilitarian. Brooke-Rose presents the literary conference as the last bastion of defense for literature, and it is a poor defense that separates literature from life and estranges it from good readers. The novel suggests with negative examples that the survival of literature depends on the ability of scholars to recognize and promote the power of fiction.

In *Moo*, Jane Smiley similarly promotes the value of education. Professors like Lionel Gift, Bo Jones and Dean Jellinek pervert the purpose of education by using their authority as university professors and their knowledge as educated men to forward their own objectives without regard to feasibility or social purpose. These are men who work

in self-enclosed worlds and prosper for their refusal to hold to any standards but their own, and they stand in specific contrast to professors like Chairman X, Joy Pfisterer, and Cecelia Sanchez, all of whom are conscientious teachers and idealistic members of the university. The good, as opposed to the bad, in Smiley's novel are life-affirming and community-oriented, but they struggle in the present-day university as funding cuts and grantsmanship encourage competition and specialization instead of community and idealism. This compromises the true purpose of education and, ironically, as the most light-hearted book in this study, Smiley's book is the most pessimistic in its conclusion. For although a hidden source of funding comes to light and the jobs and projects of Chairman X, Joy and Cecelia are saved, the money comes at the potential cost of doing further damage to the community. This money is actually at odds with the sensibilities of the good, publicly responsible scholars and more representative of the ideologically warped and self-serving policies of the bad. Nonetheless, this serious price is one that those in charge at the university do not hesitate to pay, and the university thrives by refusing to discriminate. This is represented by the pig that Dr. Bo Jones feeds in order to find out just how big a pig can get. Symbolically, the pig represents the university as a bloated, crippled institution victimized by the greed and imprudent behaviour of those in charge.

Therefore, despite the customary characterization of the university novel, common themes emerge in these novels that not only presuppose, but even, in several cases, insist on the value and purpose of the university and of a university education. They uniformly suggest, for example, that the true purpose of the university is compromised by those who value prestige over principle and who are driven by a purely competitive impulse devoid

of idealism or love of their subject (which is, in all cases but *Moo*, literature). Literature, as is true for any subject in the university, is valued as it promotes thought and conveys knowledge, and (in several cases) as it embodies something other and finally ineffable in its capacity as art. Throughout all the novels, sympathy is encouraged by the characters' love of their subject and, importantly, by their willingness and desire to learn: Sarah, Maud, Roland, Beatrice, Hank, Adam, Kelly, Chairman X, Joy, Cecelia and Robyn are depicted as conscientious teachers and enthusiastic scholars because they understand the value of thought and are invigorated by their subjects, and by knowledge. Meanwhile characters such as Morton, Crabtree, and Richard become sympathetic to the degree that they allow themselves to express their love for literature and admit a desire to learn. The negative characters are those who are close-minded and dogmatic, who avoid learning as it challenges their beliefs and destabilizes their positions: Morton, Leonora Stern (to a degree), Cropper, W.H. Devereaux Sr., Dickie Pope, Crabtree (before his transformation), Mensonge, Gazza, Frank Underwood, Richard, Rita Humboldt, Dr. Gift, and Dr. Jellinek are limited in their apprehension of their subject and their community and the degree to which they cater to these limitations is the degree to which they reveal their desire to compromise thought and knowledge in favour of power and entitlement.

It is also interesting and instructive to note that often the redeeming feature of the scholar in these novels is his/her proficiency as an artist. Indeed, there seems to be a clear bias toward creative writing as a means of contextualizing the pursuits of the literary critic in the contemporary university novel: Roland, Hank, and Adam, specifically, but even Sarah, with her letters and love of language, and Richard in his botched attempts at authorship, are shown to be especially enlightened readers and capable critics for their

ability (and/or proven inability) to be creative themselves and thus identify more closely with the particular burdens and rewards of creativity. While it may be deemed self-interested for writers to consider those who profess a sincere love for literature (or, even better, an ability to write creatively themselves) as those the best-qualified to critique it, it may be equally self-interested of scholars not to consider this position. Instead, it could be a unique opportunity to hear from the creative writer/critic, as the only one qualified to speak intelligently on both the creative and critical enterprises. Most of the authors of the ten books discussed in this project are or have been employed as both scholars and writers, have worked both inside the university and outside of it: Byatt, Russo, Reed, Bradbury, Grudin, Brooke-Rose, Smiley and Lodge all work or have worked in the university system. Although they have had varying degrees of success as both writers and scholars, they all, without exception, demonstrate this bias toward creative writing as a means of forging a more productive and rewarding relationship to literature as a critic. Perhaps this should stand as a challenge to English departments which have a tendency to discredit creative writing as a means of qualification. Certainly, it is offered as a challenge to any critical practice that questions the primacy of literature as the main focus of the department of English.

It is furthermore interesting to note that in the novels the perceptible sense of the value and purpose of literature, of education and of the university is in specific contrast to the non-fiction writing on the state of the university. In the non-fiction, it is widely held that academics are losing or have lost touch with the university's value and purpose. Perhaps rapid technological advancement and the fractious critical environment of the last twenty years are to blame for this confusion, perhaps not. But these university novelists



posit things upon which, they suggest, all academics should agree: it is knowledge that is the university's common subject. Scholarly ability is to be located in the ability to service knowledge, to seek it out, embrace and communicate it. It is thought that is the academic's most essential aim in this service, and it is for education that academics exist as a community inside one of the most important institutions in contemporary society. This is the ideal and, indeed, idealism concerning the purpose and function of the university is not an altogether inappropriate answer to more material problems, because idealism has a clear function of its own. For instance, idealism is capable of balancing an over-reaching competitive impulse, of off-setting the reduction of any wider sense of purpose in the university to the most financially practical, and consumer-friendly basics, of providing common ground between the most traditional humanist and faithful post-structuralist, of uniting the purpose of the critic and artist and of answering to the public's need for socially responsible and community-minded scholarship.

If this idealism begins to break down in the non-fiction writing on the university as it attempts to look for practicable solutions, it is able to survive in the university novel that revels not simply in limits but in possibilities. Perhaps as a reflection of this, it becomes a popular suggestion in the non-fiction that the only thing that academics could feasibly agree upon and offer as a community is conflict.<sup>9</sup> The recent evolution in the university novel seems to suggest that there is something infinitely greater and more effectively unifying than that in the common cause of education. And thus, it may not be

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<sup>9</sup> This idea is most widely recognized as Gerald Graff's as it appears in his influential, and controversial, book *Beyond the Culture Wars: how teaching the conflicts can revitalize American education*. But it also appear in various other forms, notably, as the University of Dissensus in Bill Readings' influential and controversial book *The University in Ruins*.

covert self-interest but consistency in studying university novels to find that they demand the reader go back, even still, to the books.

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