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Images Of Our Tottering Tower The Academic Novel As A Metaphor For Our Times

Atque inter silvas academi quaerere verum.

(Horace, Ep. II, ii 45)

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 emergent genre, or rather sub-genre, of the last thirty years: the academic novel. Images not without special relevance, even perhaps a masochistic appeal for the readers of such a journal as this, since they purport, presumably, to be our own . . . Across several literatures, North American and European, and coinciding historically with an unprecedented expansion in the accessibility of post-secondary education, there has appeared over this period a remarkable profusion of such writing, presenting, often exclusively, a social group and a particular setting that had previously been, at the very most, peripheral to novelists' preoccupations.

Of course, Hawthorne, Thackeray and others episodically explored the tranquil academic groves of the nineteenth century, and, in the first part of the twentieth, Max Beerbohn's *Zuleika Dobson* encapsulates and exemplifies the seemingly permanent gentility of those balmy Varsity days of yesteryear, in which the only mildly disruptive factor, apart from the "breath-bereaving"¹ Miss Dobson herself, might be some passing flamboyant aesthete.

But it was only really from about 1950 onwards that the premise of somnolent esteem on which university life seemed to be founded was investigated in a spate of novels, seminal (if you'll forgive me) amongst which must be C.P. Snow's *Strangers and Brothers* sequence of eleven novels, Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* and Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*. As yet, however, there was none of the hostility and anguish that was to follow in the mid-sixties; rather the university

novel of this period is characterised primarily by a realistic acceptance of the contemporary world, tinged with a largely tolerant irony and an early good-humoured interrogation. Not surprisingly, for it was still a time of plenty with none of the subsequent pressures of 'financial exigency'. Mary McCarthy's narrator recounts:

There was a whiff of paganism in the air, of freedom from material cares that evoked the South Sea island even in the Pennsylvania winter; more than one faculty-member washed up on this coral strand, came to resemble in dress and habits, the traditional beachcomber of fiction.²

There is, in McCarthy's novel, a kindly, but newly perceptive differentiation between the reality and the fiction of an institution dedicated traditionally to Truth, but seemingly, fraught with a multiplicity of often highly personalised truths at the 'real' level. This is perhaps the most disquieting feature of a novel that chides rather than condemns. It is not dissimilar in this to C.P. Snow's contemporaneous investigation of the mechanisms of decision-making, the craft of government and the psychology of power within a university setting which, at times, appears somewhat incidental to the author's principal concerns. Certainly, the occasional lack of integrity amidst the panoply, ceremony, deference and etiquette of Cambridge is not dissembled, but the refined and decorous attractiveness of crumpets and muffins, silver platters and oak-panels, clearly continue to engage the bulk of Snow's sympathy.

More overtly jocular, although mildly mournful of a university scene where erstwhile elevation is showing unmistakable signs of incipient mediocrity, Amis' *Lucky Jim* is properly regarded as perhaps the single most influential novel of this period, in that it established, especially in England, a very particular comic mode: softish satire and mischievous pasquinades of the quirks, eccentricities and foibles of the intellectual. In France too, within this period which extends into the mid-sixties, although there are far fewer such novels, an identical tone occurs. Robert Escarpit, for example, in *Le Littératron*, chastises without rancour the already fashionable artifices employed for advancement by those seeking to make their way up the university ladder:

Il faudra que je porte des lunettes à monture de nylon (...): cela donne un regard qui tient de l'intellectuel catholique et du technocrate de gauche—juste le mélange à la mode.³

Of the same ilk, and in the same novel, is the not unfamiliar appropriation, for the better marketing of research, of a resonant prefix such as

bio, *euro*, or *cosmo*; or better still a commanding suffix such as the *-tron* displayed to advantage in the title.

Elsewhere, other peccadilloes are noted: Nabokov's Professor Timofey Pnin, a droll creature, inept with his hands, is at odds with a modern, increasingly gadget-ridden world:

His life was a constant war with insensate objects that fell apart or attacked him, or refused to function, or viciously got themselves lost as they entered the sphere of his existence.⁴

His kindred spirit is Professor Stuart Treece in Malcolm Bradbury's 1959 first novel, *Eating People is Wrong*, who is "almost but not quite fitted [to] the situation of the present time."⁵

Not inappropriately it is Bradbury who sums up in his "Afterword" to that novel the prevailing situation that colours the university novel of this initial period. For him, despite a growing number of often amused queries and concerns:

The university is still the open-minded, fair-minded environment of disinterested and critical knowledge, itself a liberal place; the turmoils of confrontation and the radical critique have not yet reached it, the tension, the stern historicism, the collectivist passions have not yet come.⁶

However the latter-half of the 1960s was to see the beginning of a growing chorus of criticism that became increasingly bitter as unbridled impetus was followed by recession and stagnation, bringing on pessimism and fear. The indictment of the entire university experience, projected by more than one hundred novels of this period that I have examined is painfully exhaustive, but chooses to condemn with particular virulence the once revered university teacher - and it is an indictment which continues to this day. His - ours! - only infrequently hers, is a world of trivia and perversion, of vanity and deceit, of plagiarism and gratuitousness, of patronage and pretentiousness, of personal advantage rather than the pursuit of learning. Symptomatic of this evolution is Bradbury's second novel, *Stepping Westward*, far more severe than his earlier one towards the ineffectual intellectuals, the jargon-mongers, and the professional frauds that seem to have established themselves as the majority during the golden years of expansion. Similarly, Simon Raven, Tom Sharpe and, more recently, Howard Jacobson give delightful fictional form to dons who characteristically exult in every known perversion.

Nor is the situation any better in France, either before May 68 or after. Professors there have rediscovered all the pernicious arrogance of the clerics of old:

Autant qu'eux ils sont intimement persuadés de l'infaillibilité de leur doctrine, ils donnent des leçons, ils moralisent. Et même s'ils prônent des valeurs opposées, ils le font avec la même outrecuidance profonde, la même hyprocrisie quotidienne, et ils emploient, pour se faire écouter, les mêmes détestables moyens.⁷

The 'problem' is perceived to derive from a stunted personal growth, be it because of innate inadequacy or excessive specialisation: "the over-developed mind and the under-developed heart,"⁸ admits the reprobate monk-professor, John Parlabane in Robertson Davies' *The Rebel Angels*. Atrophied in this way, and seeking relative safety in the recondite, the academic has become, like Bellow's Herzog, a sometime scholar, but a most-time anguished and fractured example of the catastrophe of the cloistered life.

It is the same mutilating divorce from reality, and accompanying inability to cope, which explains in Catherine Rihoit's *Le Bal des débutantes* the dilemma of Professors Azeta and Delchiotto, so superior within the confines of the classroom, yet impotent when faced with the same students in a real historical situation during the demonstrations of 1968. Indeed impotence, in all its guises, has become a notably recurrent image over the last fifteen years, most strikingly perhaps in Kingsley Amis' *Jake's Thing* and Simon Raven's *Doctors Wear Scarlet* where it offers the unmistakable physical sign of a parallel personal, professional and psychological inadequacy. In fact the poor performance of the university professor in the bedroom has become almost legendary in a myriad of novels that range from the soft pornography of Joyce Thompson's *Hothouse* to the infinitely more literate *Hers* by A. Alvarez.

The inevitable corollary, of course, and a further charge levelled against the academic custodians, is that of an obsessive and lustful yearning for the bodies, rather than the minds, of their young charges, who exist only in so far as they may provide an opportunity, real or imaginary, for testing and re-affirming a waning potency. Thus, in Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue*, the annihilation of a rare student character by the explosion of a gross of gas-filled contraceptives is wholly indicative of their expendable and purely functional quality within a university! A typical presentation appears in John Barth's *The End of the Road* in the ogling lasciviousness of the handsomely-named Jacob Horner on the first day of term:

Early blue morning is an erotic time, the commencement of school terms an erotic season; little's to be done but nod to Freud on such a day.

(...) I had nothing at all to do but spin indolent daydreams of absolute authority--Nerotic, Caligular authority of the sort that summons up

officefuls of undergraduate girls, hot and submissive—leering professorial dreams!⁹

And Robert Merle's French version in *Derrière la vitre* is just as excitable and covetous: "le prof salace qui détaille l'étudiante assise à côté de lui comme si elle était à vendre, ou comme s'il avait le droit, après le cours, d'exercer sur elle un droit de cuissage."¹⁰

Happily, this indictment of university life does not limit itself to the teachers, for the administration is similarly admonished. Presidents and vice-chancellors are almost uniformly vain, ambitious, aggressive, ruthless and haughty,¹¹ and Bernard Malamud's Registrar in *A New Life* demonstrates a self-interest that is depicted as entirely representative in his occupational antipathy towards changed grades, working at the weekend, the lecturers' vacations Duplicity, of course, is at least as rife—I should stress for self-preservation that I am merely deploying the findings of my recent fictional readings!—in the administrative camp as in the academic. Gérard Bessette, for example, in *Les Pédagogues*, having already lacerated the teaching staff, turns his critical gaze on an administration at the Ecole de Pédagogie de Montréal which is prepared to evisage promotion on three grounds only: attendance at religious services, *non*-membership of the unions, and personal relationships with those of influence.¹²

Collegiality, even duplicitous, is a word I have yet to encounter in the literature of this period, for there is always a blatant university hierarchy which places administration at the top with the teaching staff close to the bottom, certainly well below Physical Plant and Maintenance. It is an arrangement of power which is admirably celebrated in the pre-eminence of the Admin. building:

Comme le seigneur du Moyen Age avait droit à son pigeonnier, l'administration de la Fac. de Nanterre, afin que nul n'ignore qu'administrer est plus important qu'enseigner, a reçu en partage une tour, qui domine de ses huit étages altiers les quatre bâtiments de quatre étages chacun, dédiés avec humilité aux tâches pédagogiques.¹²

An American counterpart is provided at Benedict Arnold university in Bradbury's *Stepping Westward*, where the mid-Western architect, eclectic, cosmopolitan and heritage-conscious, has conceived an outstanding Administration building with a tower from a French château, a bastion from a German schloss, a turret from an Italian castello, and a minaret from the Taj Mahal!

And so the list of charges continues A thesis is "un piège de mandarinat"¹⁴ or "un piège à nigauds;"¹⁵ a Ph.D. is presented, more subtly oiled, as "that blessed degree that stamps us for life as creatures of guaranteed intellectual worth;"¹⁶ a "doctorat d'université" is no

more than a “divertissement made in Paris” designed for those “tâcherons de la cellule grise qui prétendent à d’abusifs lauriers!”¹⁷ And elsewhere a crass commercialism, replacing the bygone aspirant—adept relationship by one that is patently consumer-retailer, is ‘wittingly’ articulated thus by one Head of Business Studies:

Our aim in this business school is not to produce a narrow academic guy, but to well-round his personality so that he can sell himself to everyone he meets.¹⁸

“Education for immediate effective consumption”¹⁹ as it is termed in yet another work.

Undoubtedly, the fictional lament is considerable, and would seem to attest to a widespread and increasing disillusionment with intellectuals and universities. Certainly recent polls and surveys confirm that the university professor and his environment are substantially less admired to-day than even twenty-five years ago. And a statistical tit-bit from England in passing reveals that whereas a University professor in 1914 earned eight times the average wage, to-day he earns not much more than one and a half times—an empty comparison, I admit, in terms of social or moral merit, but nevertheless a sharp monthly reminder of our relative demise. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to contend that the academic has become, in the last decade or so, the butt and the bane for many . . . the ultimate contemporary anti-hero. A group that has for centuries enjoyed a privileged position in society’s regard is in the literary process of being vigorously and systematically re-catalogued.

However, there is more; the poignancy of the implications may not be reserved for us alone. For the university, variously citadel of knowledge, quaint retreat and web of intrigue, is becoming in the most recent fiction a microcosm. And, I would urge, not merely some incidental springboard for a generalised anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism or mistrust of culture *per se*, but a microcosm of the human predicament itself in the spectral year 1984.

The shift is heralded in the mid- to late seventies by three novels in which there is an increasing speculation on history and the situation of the professor, however unwilling or unable, as both observer and participant. The only salvation, it would seem, for the lost soul he has become is re-immersion in, or recognition of, the historical process—a re-discovery of that umbilical cord, however fragile, which joins him to the rest of mankind. It is a meditation which gives new impetus and a potential for growth to a sub-genre that could otherwise have degenerated into the merely self-flagellating and repetitious.

A character in David Lodge's *Changing Places* observes, for example, to the hitherto ultra-traditional scholar-recluse Philip Swallow: "You've gotten caught up in the historical process." The newness of this perturbs him and he responds. "It's most embarrassing. I feel a complete fraud."²⁰ The same concern is in evidence in Raymond Jean's *Les Deux Printemps* with its formal confrontation of Paris University problems with the contemporaneous communist/conservative struggles in Prague; both are construed as manifestations of the human predicament within "un univers concentrationnaire."²¹ Equally grim, although couched in humour, is Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*, in which the indication of the title is carried into the text through an exergual quotation taken from Günther Grass regarding Hegel's sentencing of "mankind to history." In each of these novels, supported of course by the staple academic diet of "sleeping tablets and Librium,"²² the characters wrestle to ascertain their place in a society from which the rest of the world is no longer excluded. Howard Kirk, the radical sociologist—protagonist of Bradbury's novel, states it most clearly: the university situation had become by the late 1970s "a metaphor for the times."²³

More recently still, and in the wake of such reflections, the last year or two has seen the university novel open out and embrace a far greater territorial sweep. Nor is this merely a referential recognition of the greater mobility—of course I do not refer to place of tenure—the academic now enjoys through improved communications and transport systems; rather it is a symptom of that aspiration towards exemplarity which now seems to have come to the fore. Thus the international participants in Claude Delarue's *Le Dragon dans la glace* gather for debate each day, far from their respective universities, beneath the eternal backdrop of the glaciers; the conference-trotting inhabitants of Lodge's global campus in *Small World* are whirling bodies in almost infinite space, that come together occasionally, interact or clash, and move on; and Slaka, the Central European setting for Bradbury's most recent work, *Rates of Exchange*, is a city, ancient and modern, emphatically situated at a geographic, cultural, economic and ethnic crossroads.

The world which emerges from these novels—all published in the last year—is one that is unreliable, ambivalent, hypercomplex and on the verge of collapse. Thus Dr. Petworth becomes, in Bradbury's novel, variously Petwurt, Petvort, Petwit, Petwothim, Petwartha, Putwet, Putwum and Pervert, in a—dare I say—nominal, *almost* terminal, crisis of identity and experience within a shifting, alien, existence characterised by solitude, secrecy and mistrust. And Philip Swallow, returning in Lodge's *Small World*, where coincidence and

chance reign supreme, asks in despair: "what in God's name is the point of it all?"²⁴

At the same time formal properties, often cultivated in a sub-genre that is extremely self-reflexive, endorse, through fractured narrative (Aurélia Briac's *Le Meilleur de nous-mêmes*), broken unpunctuated discourse (Serge Doubrovsky's *Un amour de soi*), and the ubiquitous, random, picaresque, a vision of a world that is not only unhinged and invertebrate, but decomposing—"apocalyptic" proposes Dean Corde in Bellow's *The Dean's December*.²⁵

In so far as it adds a certain awesome quality to all such gatherings, the reader may be pleased to hear—though not surprised, especially those who have attended MLA Conventions ("un vrai bordel,"²⁶ "a three-ring circus"²⁷ are the proper novelistic assessments)—that the academic setting most favoured to inform the apocalypse is that of a conference

The great fore-runner in this is undoubtedly Arthur Koestler's *The Call-Girls*. As if the title for a novel on conference-attending scholars were not already sufficiently inflammatory, the work is thereafter dedicated to Bouvard and Pécuchet, Flaubert's sometime gentlemen of leisure, engaged in abortive academic endeavour, and in whom book-learning is unbalanced by a disastrous lack of judgment! Koestler's conference seeks, under the everpresent menace of a worsening world crisis, to diagnose the nature of the human predicament and to prescribe an approach to survival; but the participants find no common ground and their respective arguments are finally self-annihilating. Sir Evelyn Blood, representing the humanities, as he listens to the radio bulletins on the international tension, has a vision of the loudspeakers bursting open: "spewing fire and brimstone, burying alive the whole damned assembly of call-girls."²⁸ The real apocalypse is, however, limited to the acrid fumes which announce that all the recordings of the conference proceedings have been consumed by fire. Nothing has been achieved, no record remains. Koestler's warning is clearly articulated: "The impotence of our imagination makes us incapable of believing in to-morrow's apocalypse, even though we can hear the black horses stamping their hooves."²⁹

Similarly apocalyptic is Claude Delarue's *Le Dragon dans la glace*, published in 1983. Again, the only enlightenment that permeates the gathering gloom of an international colloquium on coping with the ungraspable complexity of the world is the certainty of failure:

On se rendait compte tout à coup que le perfectionnement des moyens d'investigation, le travail en équipe, le développement de l'intelligence analytique et la diversité des découvertes qu'ils supposaient, loin d'aboutir à une convergence de vue sur les questions fondamentales et à

un accord sur la conception du monde raisonnable et sensée, élargissaient le fossé qui séparait les êtres et les divisait.³⁰

The defeat of these representatives of academe and humanity is already signalled as the novel progress in their inability to comprehend the irrational, non-objective, foreign-ness of the Hungarian major-domo; the world refuses to be interpreted—or, every decoding is another encoding as Lodge and Bradbury would prefer, more fashionably, to have it. The conflagration at the end of Delarue's novel is entire; all are consumed in the final flames as the conference centre burns to the ground.

Fictions they may be, but 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, of upturned values, of individual and social disintegration, of a looming holocaust that is not necessarily nuclear. The relevance of the recent academic novel, in which the protagonist is both prophet and victim, to man's various but common concerns seems to have become, therefore, fundamental.

NOTES

1. Beerbohm, M., *Zuleika Dobson*, London: Penguin, 1954 p. 72.
2. McCarthy, M., *The Groves of Academe*, Toronto: Signet, 1963, p. 64.
3. Escarpit, R., *Le Littératron*, Paris: Flammarion, 1964, p. 20.
4. Nabokov, V., *Invitation to a Beheading*, London: Penguin, 1983, p. 12.
5. Bradbury, M., *Eating People is Wrong*, London: Arrow, 1978, p. 12.
6. Ibid., "Afterword," p. 297.
7. Réouven, R., *Un tueur en Sorbonne*, Paris: Denoel, 1984, pp. 59-60.
8. Davis, R., *The Rebel Angels*, London: Penguin, 1983, p. 81.
9. Barth, J., *The End of the Road*, New York: Bantam, 1981, pp. 94-5.
10. Merle, R., *Derrière la vitre*, Paris: Gallimard, 1974, p. 96.
11. vide Kramer J., "College and University Presidents in Fiction," *Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 52 no. 1, pp. 81-95.
12. Anne Srabian de Fabry explores this more fully in "Le Professor et la littérature canadienne-française," *Canadian Literature*, no. 76, pp. 68-77.
13. Merle, R., op. cit., p. 63.
14. Rihoit, C., *Le Bal des débutantes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1978, p. 150.
15. Escarpit, R., op. cit., p. 17.
16. Davies, R., op. cit., p. 34.
17. Réouven, R., op. cit., pp. 46-7.
18. Bradbury, M., *Stepping Westward*, London: Arrow, 1979, p. 70.
19. Davies, R., op. cit., p. 178.
20. Lodge, D., *Changing Places*, London: Penguin, 1981, p. 174.
21. Jean, R., *Les Deux Printemps*, Paris: Seuil, 1978, p. 190. The book was originally published in the early seventies but had little success. As the author states in his foreword, the book was then re-issued in 1978 because its historical resonance seemed to have come of age.
22. Bradbury, M., *The History Man*, London: Arrow, 1982, p.1.
23. Ibid., p. 16.
24. Lodge, D., *Small World*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1984, p. 28.

25. Bellow, S., *The Dean's December*, New York: Pocket, 1983, p. 227.
26. Doubrovsky, S., *Un amour de soi*, Paris: Hachette, 1982, p. 272.
27. Lodge, D., *Small World*, p. 313.
28. Koestler, A., *The Call-Girls*, London: Hutchinson, 1972, p. 78.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
30. Delarue, C., *Le Dragon dans la glace*, Paris: Balland, 1983, p. 83.