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GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

IN THE PENTHOUSE OF THE IVORY TOWER

TK

DISCUSSED: *TK*

It's two days after Christmas and I'm driving to San Diego with Charlie, the punk professor, across southern Arizona. It's a long drive, we've never met before, and there's not much to look at—the landscape is mostly desert with the occasional supermax prison—but the awkward pauses have been thankfully minimal. We stop in Yuma on the California border so I can get a cup of coffee and he can get some Cheetos; Charlie's wife thinks it sets a bad example for Skylar, their five-year-old, when Charlie eats Cheetos, so they've decided that he's only allowed to eat them when he's more than a hundred miles from home. Charlie's talking about Marxism and Foucault and it's not easy to follow. I used to be able to talk about this stuff fluently, but right now most of it is just rocketing over my head. A road trip with someone you've never met—more specifically, a road trip across a prison-clogged desert with an English professor you've never met—is a delicate thing, and we both want this to go well, because he's about to be my guide and interpreter for four days at the 119th Annual Modern Language Association Convention.

In 1883, humanities professors in American universities had approximately two acceptable curricular options: Greek and Latin. Shakespeare, both in English and enjoyable, was decadent. Guided by some expatriated German and French colleagues—who claimed that

Illustration by Tony Millionaire

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modern German and French literature weren't just elaborate nineteenth-century fads—forty professors got together to form the Modern Language Association. Their victory was quick and decisive, and the curriculum was modernized. Shakespeare lost his stigma. The members of the Association, newly untethered and excited to roam the expanded frontiers of their profession, scheduled an annual convention.

Charlie—Assistant Professor Charles L. Bertsch of the University of Arizona—picked me up at the Phoenix airport. The University of Arizona is in Tucson, as is Charlie's home, but Charlie had assured me on the phone that the two cities were right next to each other, they might as well be twin cities, really, and he insisted that it wasn't a problem to pick me up. He would just swing by on his way to the convention. Charlie after I arrived to let me know that he was running late: he had to wait for the post office to open early on a Saturday morning to resend some grad-school recommendations for a student that might have gotten lost in the mail. While waiting, I looked at a map of Arizona; Tucson, it turned out, was 116 miles away, of which perhaps 50 could be construed as "on the way" to San Diego. Charlie showed up about ninety minutes later and we headed west on Interstate 8.

These days, the MLA counts over thirty thousand members, of which ten thousand tend to show up for the annual convention. MLA membership, like academia itself, is weighted toward the East Coast, so conferences in California are not as well attended: only eighty-seven hundred professors were coming to San Diego. Over the course of four days between Christmas and New Year's, those eighty-seven hundred professors would attend over eight hundred academic panels featuring upwards of three thousand papers; endure countless job interviews; and socialize at scores of cash bars, not to mention the two open bars. I've never been to a convention before—much less an English-professor convention—so Charlie offered to help me along. He's a big, thoughtful, friendly fellow with a clipped goatee, an earring, and a sloping bald forehead flanked by unruly brown hair. He has pointy incisors and a heavy Germanic brow; they conspire with his overwhelming generosity and goofy grin to make him seem a cross between Santa Claus and Faust.

Charlie's primary area of research is on contemporary American literature, but he's also writing a book about punk. In the early nineties, he and some other grad students in the UC Berkeley English Department founded an online arts-politics-&-culture journal called *Bad Subjects,* to which he still contributes. He also writes and interviews for *Punk Planet,* a magazine out of Chicago. He's as comfortable talking about the history of his favorite indie record labels—particularly his holy trinity of Matador, Drag City, and Thrill Jockey—as he is talking about Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser and cultural critic Frederic Jameson. He likes to collect anecdotal evidence of the collision of these two worlds: Pavement's Stephen Malkmus and Silver Jews' David Berman met the *Baffler*'s Thomas Frank at the University of Virginia radio station; the frontman from Bad Religion, Greg Graffin, has a doctorate in evolutionary biology. Charlie tells these anecdotes well, and I find I share his almost pornographic fascination with them. (I've since repeated them without due credit.)

Which is to say that Charlie defies the elbow-patched stereotype. In mid-December, I read a piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by senior staff-writer Scott McLemee called "Signifyin' at the MLA," which inaugurated the first annual "Provokies"—the Awards for the Most Self-Consciously Provocative MLA Paper Titles. Awards were given in such categories as Transgressive Punctuation—"If I'm Lyin' I'm Flyin' and I Ain't Seen a Bird All Day: Signifyin' Theories"—and Dangerous Hipness—"Taking Away the Threat: *Cribs* and *The Osbournes* as Narratives of Domestication." Most Provocative Panel Title went to "Apertures and Orifices in Chaucer," which featured the Most Provocative Paper Title: "'The Entree Was Long and Streit, and Gastly for to See': Visual and Verbal Penetration in the Knight's Tale." The piece itself was a droll satire, but the responses I read on the

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Internet—in blogs and on bulletin boards—were angry and defensive. "It looks like it's MLA-bashing season again," wrote one anonymous professor. The piece, harmless as it was, recalled for many academics the journalistic snipery they're used to. Attacks on ivory-tower irrelevance, arrogant unclarity, and tweedy condescension often accompany each year's MLA convention, especially in local papers. In the few weeks leading up to my trip to San Diego, more than a few friends said things such as, "Oh, you're going to the MLA? What a riot. They're a bunch of sitting ducks." I hadn't been planning to shoot at them, I said. "Sitting ducks," they repeated, with knowing grins. Other friends, those less inclined to hunting metaphors, made sure I knew that I "was going to have a field day with those types." A field day? It seemed they expected me to go to San Diego and physically beat the hell out of these people.

So I was encouraged to find that Charlie, with his extracurricular interests and ability to communicate as a human being, was neither a sitting duck nor a field-day bull's-eye. But he was anxious about how his profession came off in the media, and though he got the humor in McLemee's Provokies, he took the media's treatment of humanities professors personally. And it's not just the media: at least among people I know—the sitting-ducks/field-day crowd—there seems to be a tacit consensus that English professors are self-parodying hypocrites who claim to teach English but can't even write it intelligibly, or hack critics who treat the magic of literature as so much grist for the reigning theoretical paradigm. Some of this is a garden-variety aw-shucks anti-intellectualism; some of it is jealousy of a cushy, tenured lifestyle. But neither explains the frequency or intensity of the attacks, or the extent of the suspicion. Neither implies that they deserve to be shot, or even just roughed up.

And as Charlie and I talk about criticism of the academy, it becomes clear that I have a personal investment in this, too. For an almost embarrassing portion of my life, the word "professor" had the resonance most eight-year-olds reserve for "astronaut," though I eventually decided it wasn't for me: too insulated, too bloodless. So I'm ambivalent. I want to remind myself as often as possible why it would have been a disastrous decision, but at the same time there's some tenderness. Usually, I'm as dismissive as the next guy of the pipe-smoking crackpot with the affected ambiguously European accent; in the Arizona desert with Charlie, however, it's impossible to imagine why the English professor occupies a place in the American imagination somewhere between a bumbling librarian and Vlad the Impaler.

DAY 1: Saturday December 27

Charlie and I pull into San Diego as the sun dips below the naval base to the west. The convention is housed in three waterfront monoliths. On the left: a low-slung convention center like a beached cruise ship. In the middle: a slate-colored Marriott with a corporate-headquarters-ish feeling, one of those buildings that looks as though it's sheathed in mirrored cop glasses. And on the far right: the twin-towered Manchester Grand Hyatt. If you sort of blur your eyes, it looks a little like the Venetian in Vegas. From an academic angle, Charlie finds the Hyatt most interesting. "It's got one modern tower and one postmodern tower!" he says, and laughs. I can't tell which is which or why, but I trust that he knows what he's talking about. I figure if he says something like, "Ok, then, let's meet up at the postmodern tower," I'll just ask someone else.

We register and rush to the first big kickoff event: the Presidential Forum, entitled "Universities, Secularism, Globalities: What Are the Prospects?" The panel's title gets things going in the right vein: a list of three topics, an unwieldy plural noun, a confident colon, and a big sweeping question. Charlie and I walk into the back of the subdivided ballroom, which is filled with around five hundred seats, maybe a third of them taken. Charlie pulls two seats directly back out of the final row. We put our feet up.

Mary Pratt, the current president of the MLA, introduces the panel: Masao Miyoshi of UC San Diego, Ferial Ghazoul of the

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American University of Cairo, and Gayatri Spivak of Columbia; the latter, whom Pratt calls "our most conspicuous traveling theorist," is a guru of what's called "postcolonial theory" and current academic megastar and the only one I've heard of, although apparently—according to Charlie—all three panelists pack some serious scholarly credentials.

Miyoshi stands up to speak first, and from a distance it looks like he's actually sporting elbow patches. He hadn't been sure until that morning, he announces, where exactly he would be speaking, whom he would be addressing, or what he was supposed to be talking about, so please forgive him. He looks a little befuddled but also sure of himself, like a celebrity who has forgotten which clip he brought to show the audience on Letterman. With that caveat and apology, what follows is 95 percent unintelligible. What I get out of it is this: The university is veering toward a business style of management. Funds are being redirected away from the humanities and toward the applied sciences. There's an increasingly corporate-tinged emphasis on the production of useful knowledge—physics, biochemistry—which leads us to ask this question: is humanistic study becoming "irrelevant, inconsequential, or just incomprehensible?" These pockets of sense-making sentences, however, are occluded deep within a whole lot of non-sense-making about the relation between the humanities and something called "environmental biojustice."

I just can't concentrate on the substance of his talk, however, because something about his delivery seems off-kilter; I decide it's just me. After a few minutes, Charlie elbows me and whispers, "I think that his lips are out of sync with his words." I laugh. Then I realize it's true: his mouth is actually making the wrong shapes, as though he's starring in a poorly dubbed Kung Fu movie. Charlie and I look at each other, struck dumb. Then, to add to the blazing surreality of the moment, Miyoshi refers to the twentieth century's *three* world wars. "Did he just say three world wars?" Charlie asks. "Yes," I say. Charlie is sweating. He really likes his job and his profession—in a heartrendingly noble and admirable way—and here, at event number one, is his profession at its most cartoonish. I really like Charlie and I have already noticed that most journalists are unnecessarily unkind to academics, so I start sweating, too.

Finally, Charlie's face flushes and he turns to me. "*There's a mike delay!*" he blurts out, maybe a little too loudly. It's just a mike delay, and both of us are embarrassed that we thought it was something more uncanny or sinister. With that crisis of confidence safely behind us, we return to the largely fruitless attempt to parse Miyoshi's sentences. Then, midthought, Miyoshi abandons a clause, thanks the audience, and takes his seat. Charlie apologizes for him. "I saw him speak on post-1945 Japanese art once, and he was brilliant. I think he was just a little flustered. He must have written that on the plane here this morning."

"I'm pretty sure he teaches in San Diego," I say, looking at the program. Charlie looks crestfallen, like he just watched his dad strike out at the family-reunion softball game. This opening experience has done nothing but confirm practically every single negative stereotype about the MLA. I can see he's trying to decide whether there's a way to save face. He decides to admit that there isn't. "Well, I guess you can safely ridicule *that*."

If Miyoshi nailed the English-prof-as-space-cadet caricature, the next speaker, Ferial Ghazoul, comes across as the stuffy, affected poseur. She speaks as though she has cultivated a robust headcold; exquisitely calibrated sinus pressure steamrolls her vowels, so she holds the middle syllable of "university" for a full two seconds. Her words sound extruded rather than spoken. She gives a fairly standard "tasks of the university" talk: to aid critical reflection, to add to global knowledge, to promote multicultural awareness and crosspollination, and to be a "laboratory exploring the self and the Other in a humanist framework." Humanities professors should help "oppose imperialist hegemony" with a "dynamic strategy of bringing subalterns into alliance."

Then, after twenty minutes of talk about what a university is for, she comes to a melodramatic

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crescendo. There's a very long pause. She looks out at the thinning crowd and says, "What we do not ask ourselves is: what for is a university?"

What for is a university? Aside from the fact that she has just asked that question literally two minutes before in the normal put-the-damn-preposition-at-the-end sort of way, what floors me is that this question and its chief syntactic variant—what is a university for?—are asked at the conference with astonishing frequency. If the MLA-conference organizers made sloganed T-shirts, the front would read: "MLA Convention, San Diego: 'What for are we in 2003?'" And the back: "What are we for in 2004?"

And this is the weird thing: they don't even mean "what for is a *university?*"—they mean "what for are *English professors?*" There are tons of answers to the first question: to teach students, to examine political configurations and economic policies, to study earthquakes and tsunamis, and of course to help build fighter jets or antigravity rooms or more muscular bionic arms. But what are English professors for? They teach, of course, but they don't help out with economic policy, they have little to say about either earthquakes or tsunamis, and they can't build futuristic prostheses. And the better off the applied sciences get at answering these lurking purpose-questions—"Hey, check out this new laser-equipped invisibility hat we just made in the lab"—the more their colleagues over in the English building seem like starry-eyed, impractical romantics, or, less charitably, anachronistic buffoons. Despite her clotted jargon and fustian grammar, Ghazoul is making a serious point: more and more people are wondering what the hell English professors doing and why they should be allowed to keep doing it, and they need to reformulate their answers.

I sort of want to see Spivak speak, but Charlie has made plans with some friends for dinner, so we leave at the end of Ghazoul's talk. We go to a charmless barbecue place called O'Kansas's—or some other Irish-sounding interpretation of a Midwestern state name—and join a group of old grad-school friends and friends-of-friends. I meet Eric Hayot, a colleague of Charlie's at Arizona, who tells me within minutes of our introduction how genuinely happy he is that the MLA is held each year between Christmas and New Year's. It's such a special time of year, he says, a time for being with loved ones, and he's glad he can spend it at the MLA. It's a nice sentiment. Most attendees are at the conference either to be interviewed for jobs or interview others, so this kind of enthusiasm is unusual. Well, the *expression* of this enthusiasm is unusual; most people seem to share Eric's feelings, even if they don't always want to cop to it. Lots of the professors just come to see friends. I keep wanting to describe it as a reunion—one great big national grad-school reunion—but it's more like a retreat. A reunion is gathering of people who have come together to parade all of the things they've done in the outside world since they last came together; a retreat is a refuge from the demands of that outside world. If you spend a lot of time defending why, exactly, you should be allowed to make your living studying metaphors of hydrophilia in Medieval Ukrainian folk ballads, it's really pleasant to spend a few days around people who take it for granted that it's a perfectly normal thing to do.

Once I get past the requisite "Oh, another MLA-vilifying piece?" with each new person I meet, I find that there are exactly two things they want to talk about: tenure, publishing, and other academic pressures, which make them wince, and teaching, which makes them glow. The topic of literature itself straddles the two: literature is either "what you're writing your tenure book on" or "what you teach to your students," and the responses vary accordingly.

One of the first things I hear about that night, however, is that issues of tenure are inseparable from issues of pedagogy. Charlie complains that it doesn't seem fair that your ability to continue working as a teacher depends on how your tenure committee evaluates you as a scholar. Charlie's colleague Corinne—who has just effervesced for an uninterrupted half hour about a course she cotaught with a lepidopterist on *Lolita* and butterflies, complete with extended

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camping trips and campfire Nabokov-reading—sympathizes, but counters that she still thinks that you have to be actively engaged in the creation of new knowledge—as a scholar—to take a respected role in its university-level dissemination. That seems true: from our high-school teachers, we expect only a reasonable mastery of the basic subject matter, but from our college professors we demand a substantive personal contribution in their field. It's not an easy issue to navigate; there's lots to be said on both sides. These tenure questions throw long shadows over most of the convention's conversations, and seem integral to understanding what's at stake in San Diego. The big issue of the Presidential Forum was how to justify the profession to outsiders; tenure is the process through which a professor justifies herself to other insiders. Corinne suggests I attend a panel the next morning on tenure-related issues.

Most attendees stay at the conference's expensive hotels, but Charlie wants a little more room and a "breather from all of the madness," so we stay at a Residence Inn about twenty minutes outside of town. The parking lot is thick with black Cadillac Escalades that don't fit inside the parking spaces, and Charlie has to sign a special form that promises we won't throw any parties. Charlie insists on taking the pullout couch. We talk a little across the hotel-room half-dark before falling asleep to the thumpy sounds of clandestine festivities next door.

DAY 2: Sunday December 28

The morning panels begin at 8:15, but we sleep in; I'm told the morning panels tend to be ill-attended, as are the night panels, and most of the afternoon panels, as well. We arrive ten minutes late to Forum #191, "The Publishing and Tenure Crisis," which started at 10:15. There are no problems at the MLA; there are only crises. I make a quick cluster-diagram of the crises and their relations to one another, but it gets too complicated and I reduce it to a list: tenure, publishing, tenure/publishing, theory (which is either theory's perennial superabundance or its current ebb), and academic freedom. This might just reflect the MLA's general penchant for melodrama. Nevertheless, there are a bunch of real, interconnected crises, most of which can be traced back to the what-are-we-for unease.

The first speaker is Judith L. Ryan; she's a Rilke scholar and a Harvard professor and a commanding presence. From what I can tell, she's also a big deal and an elder statesperson of the profession, because when I ask Corinne who she is, no fewer than nine people around us tell me that she is a Rilke scholar and a Harvard prof and an elder statesperson of the profession. University presses, Ryan says, were until recently subsidized by their parent universities, because they were never supposed to be profit-making ventures. They were to publish small runs of esoteric scholarship that ordinary publishers would laugh at. Ideally, they would break even on sales to scholars and university libraries. Now, however, universities are cutting the presses loose, leaving them to fend for themselves in the book market, which itself is not exactly booming right now. The funds that once went to the university presses are being diverted to libraries—whose own budgets have also been slashed—and, in cruel but unsurprising irony, libraries themselves are rebudgeting their book-buying dollars for expensive scientific journals, which are often funded by corporations. More on this in a moment.

Jennifer Crewe of Columbia University Press presents some numbers, which provide perspective. Average production cost of a university-press title: $25,000. Number of total copies purchased by all university libraries in bygone days: 1,000. Number of copies sold to all libraries in current crisis-days: 200. A book that sells very well (say, 500 copies) might recoup: $10–12,000. Average loss on average university-press title: $10,000+. Subscription to run-of-the-mill scientific journal: $20,000. It's like a parody of a MasterCard commercial, and all of the "priceless" punch lines are so painfully obvious there's no reason to bother finishing the joke.

The upshot: university presses, once institutions of gentlemanly loss in the service of niche scholar-

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ship, have been forced to reorient themselves toward the bottom line. Scholarly criteria—most notably the process of peer review, whereby potential titles are sent out to experts in the field for vetting purposes—have ceded to market criteria. So the whole affair, especially the spending of lavish amounts of money on corporate-funded science journals, underlines the general fear about the steady encroachment of commercial interests into the sanctum of the university.

And there's a flipside: university presses are simply putting out too many titles. The number of scholarly monographs (book-length treatments of one subject, as opposed to collections or anthologies) in MLA-related fields in the year 2000 was twice what it was in 1989, though by most accounts the achievements of scholarship in that time have probably not doubled. This is where the publishing crisis and the tenure crisis bleed together. Most schools require one book for tenure, which usually means one book within the first five or six years out of grad school—the same years that young assistant professors have the biggest teaching loads and the smallest salaries (not to mention that they're often young parents, as Charlie is). To fulfill this book requirement, most young professors go one of two routes: they either rewrite their dissertations for publication, or they puff up one substantial journal article with some bibliographical essays and call it a book. But a dissertation is a dissertation and an article is an article and neither is a book, so their publication waters down the whole field and leads right back to the publishing crisis outlined above.

"Vicious cycle" doesn't even begin to describe it. First, it means that the presses themselves have become the de facto site of tenure evaluation, because they're the ones who decide which books to publish. This is an unwelcome responsibility for institutions that are already overtaxed and underfunded and thus teetering on the brink of collapse, not to mention pressured into bottom-line considerations and thus less inclined to put out abstruse monographs in the first place. Second—and this is where the whole thing goes from merely unfortunate to genuinely catastrophic, and where audience-members gag, actually *gag*—everyone *knows* that first books are either revised dissertations or fattened-up journal articles, so there's talk at some universities about a *second* book for tenure. The second book was originally the basis for promotion to full professor, so now we're talking about three books for the ultimate promotion—three books for increasingly market-driven presses in an increasingly hostile market. Which means not only three books, but three books *that might sell*, which is hard enough for people who are *trying* to write for a general audience.

Charlie, adrift in his own tenure-related nightmarish reverie, looks over at me and takes my pen and notebook. "I'll take a polygraph over a monograph any day," he writes slowly in big block caps.

As in anything else these days, the solution to all of this will probably be the internet—online dissertation databases, e-books, etc. But it will be a long time before internet publication has the legitimacy to sway tenure committees. And this is the crux of the P/T crisis: legitimacy. The legitimacy question that is constantly posed from the outside—"What are you guys doing over there in the English building?" or, as one prof quoted a friend in a physics department, "Do we really need *one more book* on Shakespeare?"—becomes the legitimacy question posed on the inside: "Given that we have so much to prove to so many people, whom shall we elect to join our ranks?" And every time someone in a Bill Gates Building somewhere announces a new nano-robot that simultaneously dematerializes carbs in food, identifies terrorists by the shiftiness in their eyes, and turns an old Delorean into a time machine, new corporate grants start rolling in, and the ante is upped. Assailed by so many naysayers—businesslike administrators, right-wing pundits, smarmy journalists, armchair critics of the academy—the MLA has circled its wagons and jacked up the entry fee. One professor calls the one-book-for-tenure custom "sheer mindlessness." In the United Kingdom, he says, tenure is ordinarily awarded after three or four years, on the basis of one or two meaty articles. "And they're neither better nor worse that the United

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States in their quality of humanistic scholarship."

And *everyone knows this*. For all of the reasons outlined above, everyone knows that it is utterly insane to require a book for tenure. But at the same time, these tenure committees are terrified that if they let their guard down, if they relax their own internal demands, their opponents will only amplify their snarls of frivolity and mismanagement. As the rest of the university, ever more centered around a commercial stake in the applied sciences and professional schools, finds itself accountable to outside interests, humanities departments like English have come to see themselves as the last bastions of the academy accountable only to themselves: to their own standards of scholarship, to their own hierarchies of merit and prestige, to the needs and desires and ideals of only the members of their own communities. But as the publishing crisis makes clear, English departments are being pushed toward models of external accountability. The what-are-you-for question implies that English professors must answer to other people with other criteria; it implies that they're accountable to university administrators, to the government, to the market, even to the general populace, in ways that they as scholars neither are nor should be.

As scholars. Because of course they're accountable beyond their own ranks as teachers—accountable to their students, to the parents of their students, to the taxpayers paying their salaries in the case of public universities. And of course they're accountable beyond their own ranks as poets or punks or whatever they are in their nonprofessional time. The problems arise when they're held accountable for the wrong things to the wrong people. When scholarship—which is not intended to produce a profit—is tossed to the market. When academic writing—which is neither conceived nor written for a wide readership—is held accountable to a general audience. Where the work of someone like Charlie—which is a part of an ongoing discussion deep within his remote professional galaxy—is disparaged for its everyday irrelevance.

It's no wonder that the MLA atmosphere feels so gloomy. Charlie turns to me and apologizes again. "The days of spouse-swapping orgies and coke-snorting parties are long gone," he sighs. He forces a sheepish half-smile.

I want to make sure I attend a few of the panels Scott McLemee made fun of in his "Signifyin' at the MLA" piece, so Charlie and I split up for a few hours. There are two promising ones scheduled for that afternoon: the University of Florida's Professor Kim Emery's "Judith Butler Got Me Tenure (But I Owe My Job to k. d. lang): High Theory, Pop Culture, and Some Thoughts about the Role of Literature in Contemporary Queer Studies," and Southwest Missouri State University's Professor David Escoffery and the University of Pittsburgh's Professor Michelle Sullivan's "Taking Away the Threat: *Cribs* and *The Osbournes* as Narratives of Domestication." They're both at 1:15; since they're on opposite ends of the same long crescent-shaped hallway—broken in the middle by an atrium that is mysteriously dark all the time (I had never imagined that an atrium could actually be not only dark but genuinely *foreboding*)—I figure I can go to the first half of one and the second half of the other.

I get to the reality TV panel about five minutes late. As far as I can tell, the paper on *Cribs* and *The Osbournes* has been cancelled or postponed, because the first speaker is Professor Simon P. Joyce of the College of William and Mary, whose paper is about *Joe Millionaire* and the German social theorist Theodor Adorno. I miss most of it.

I do, however, get to see Professor Elaine Chang of the University of Guelph, Ontario, give a talk about *Trista and Ryan's Wedding*. Chang's talk revolves around ideas of television, trust, and betrayal. We were supposed to feel bad when TV execs somehow poisoned Trista and Ryan's wedding—the couple who met on the original *Bachelorette,* and then got married on the eponymous sequel—with some "artificial"/commercial stunt, because Trista and Ryan were "betrayed by television." But, of course, we were glued to the television watching that betrayal; this theme—of television co-opting disgust with itself—is a common cultural-studies trope. The problem

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is it can seem shamelessly elitist in a the-masses-are-suckers sort of way. So Chang goes on to talk about reality television's true subversive potential: when rich jerk Rick Rockwell shoved his tongue into Darva Conger's mouth on *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*, all of us partook in Conger's unplanned and unscripted "frisson of disgust." "The irreducible singularity of that kiss," says Chang to a hushed crowd of maybe forty, served to "reopen a space between the subject and object collapsed in Baudrillardian hyperreality." The kiss/frisson was so overarchingly real, so communally experienced—among Rick and Darva and viewerland—that it recovered for TV a renegade democratizing potential; TV, in other words, isn't just about manipulation of guileless viewers. This faux-populist move, designed to avoid the uncomfortable tang of elitism, reveals Chang as a "cult stud"—the *Baffler*'s sarcastic nickname for a cultural-studies academic who has found a way to acquit TV/pop music/Hollywood of the usual crimes, claiming them instead as proud vessels of the collective unconscious or populist will.

I have to admit that, much as I want to resist the urge to sneer, I sneer. It's extraordinarily hard not to. I hurry along the hallway, duck through the atrium, and arrive at the queer theory panel, sneer intact and confident, sneer ready to metastasize, sneer plotting a coup to take over control of my face for the remaining two days. Then the sneer meets the University of Florida's Professor Kim Emery.

The queer theory panel is held in Manchester Ballroom C, a subdivided space appropriate for a tiny prom; I keep imagining that these massive hotels with their endlessly subdivided ballrooms could host at least two or three hundred simultaneous proms, which would probably involve less Foucault, and might make a great reality TV show. I miss Professor Emery's talk, unfortunately, and catch the tail end of the next one. The Q&A soon commences, and the first questioner asks exactly the sort of question I've been hoping would be asked, something about queer theory and its relevance beyond the borders of the academy. To what extent should the relationships queer theorists maintain with the nonacademic world—with activist groups, for example—be considered in tenure decisions? Though its prominence in McLemee's article formed part of my motivation for attending this lecture, another draw was the idea that somehow queer theory—given that it's most often practiced by queer professors and thus seems so inescapably personal—would help address questions of academic purpose. When Professor Emery fields that first question by saying, "Well, you don't get rewarded for writing stuff your softball team likes, you get rewarded for writing stuff your tenure committee likes," my interest is vindicated. Here it is, I think. These poor professors, desperate for impact beyond their tree-lined campuses, find themselves driven against their will by tenure committees into ivory-tower withdrawal from real life. It's exactly what I want to hear: these people are just dying to be relevant, but institutional wardens keep them chained up in dank library basements.

When I have the chance to talk to Professor Emery afterward, however, she makes it clear that I've understood her precisely wrong. We sit together in a subdivided ballroom just across the hallway from Ballroom C—Ballroom F, I think, and it's significantly larger. Sitting alone with someone in a large empty high-ceilinged subdivided ballroom makes you feel vulnerable—particularly with someone like Kim Emery, who speaks very slowly, permits not a single generalization about her profession or her colleagues, and bangs her flat palm against the table to punctuate her softly articulate points, points which gently explode each question I ask.

"Do you feel an exceptionally strong personal obligation to write stuff for your softball team?" I ask. The Kim Emery in my head says, "Well, yes, I want to shape my academic ideas in a way that applies to and changes the lives of not only those with whom I work, but also those with whom I play."

The Kim Emery sitting across from me, however, furrows her brow and says, "It makes me batty when people say, 'Oh, queer theory is so difficult and hard to understand, and you need to write in a more accessible way so that people

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can understand it.' That can be really patronizing sometimes. But that's the language I've learned to speak, and those to whom I'm addressing it will best understand."

"Do you think that queer professors who don't do queer studies feel irresponsible, like they *should* be doing that stuff?" The Kim Emery in my head very pleasantly responds, "Sure, of course they do. If they didn't, they would be ignoring—" The Kim Emery across the table rudely interrupts. "You should ask them," she says, "but I doubt it."

I remain cheery and undeterred. "But isn't there a more of an investment there? A more personal attachment to scholarly work than, say, with a medievalist?" She blinks and continues in the same evenly modulated tone of voice. "More than the medievalist? I doubt it. Your work is not always tied in personally in the ways one would expect; it's not always so clear. If you're going to do it"—graduate study, the sometimes-grinding life of the mind—"you have to have a personal investment, regardless. You spend endless hours engaged in really detailed research or thought, in sometimes really small and obscure things, so you have to be invested in it." I want the connection between the professor as queer theorist and the professor as queer person to be easy, direct, and immediately perceptible; she tells me that the connection is no more manifest than the connection between a Chaucerian by day and obsessive minigolfer by night. I want to take two overlapping identities—queer theorist and queer person—and pound them into coalescence: a person who does what she does as a professor—otherwise so inexplicable and obtuse!—because of who she is as a homosexual. A professor who is just flooded in a torrent of deep inexorable relevance.

"Do you feel as though queer theorists are working through personal issues in their professional work?"

"I'd have to say no."

"Is there more pressure on the queer theorist to be, say, politically involved than the medievalist?"

"Not necessarily. There are two kinds of pressure: first, pressure like that from people who are not affiliated with the academy, from people who are more politically engaged or active. I don't think the academy requires that of people at all. The kind of pressure that I think is much more widespread and profound is the pressure put on, for example, the gay medievalist who doesn't work on queer issues. So there's pressure from the academy if you're gay to be in gay studies, if you're black to be in African-American studies, etc. And that's kind of insidious. It's like this pressure to be the native informant or something, and it may be that you get rewarded for doing that instead of something else."

When she said that one doesn't get rewarded for writing stuff accessible to one's softball team, I thought she was—and wanted her to be—lamenting her condition, lamenting the sad fact of her real-world irrelevance. But as far as she is concerned, that's the way it's supposed to be. She shouldn't be rewarded by her scholarly community for writing for her softball team, she should be rewarded for writing for her scholarly community. She should be rewarded by her softball team for being a good softball player. I wanted a way to say that her scholarly work was unshakably relevant beyond the academy; she didn't feel it needed to be. I wanted to be able to point to her life as a queer person and say, "Look, she's relevant, her scholarship addresses her personal needs and concerns." And though my intentions were good, my impulse—to justify her professional activity with respect to real-world factors—was no different than the impulse to make academic monographs dependent on the book market. The marketeers want to discredit professors by suggesting that their irrelevant and overwritten books would fail the laissez-faire test; I wanted to credit them with a kind of relevance, but the underlying assumption was the same: what you're doing is useless in and of itself.

An example: Joe Schmoe is a car mechanic, a heterosexual, a libertarian, and a part-time novelist. No one says, "Oh, Joe's a car mechanic because his libertarian beliefs entail that everyone should have a car to drive around." Joe's a car mechanic because cars need to be fixed—he's useful in a very obvious way. But it's not like

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Chaucer *needs* to be interpreted. These people, in their professional capacity, are not conventionally useful, and it's hard to wrap our minds around that. Kim was trying to tell me two things. One, scholarly writing is useful to other scholars, not to you. Two, scholarship is useful as scholarship, not as some sort of personal therapy. A big part of what we do lies in the fact that we do it on its own terms; whether it's useful or not to anyone else, or even to us in our nonprofessional lives, is just not part of the equation. And as far as the taxpayers go, all we need to show is that we're doing our jobs as teachers.

The conversation with Kim Emery makes me reconsider my derision of Elaine Chang and her pontification on Trista and Ryan. Though I still think her talk was, well, silly, I understand much better where she's coming from. I tried to answer the relevance question by dramatizing the connection between professional endeavor and personal life; Chang was doing the same thing. If you're constantly bombarded with demands that you defend a life of lofty, enigmatic scholarship, it's easy to see how you might feel pressure to write about something broader in scope. But you're still beholden to your tenure committee, which is watching to make sure that Adorno never goes wantonly unreferenced. The attempted compromises—the marriage of real-world relevance and inscrutable scholarship—are almost invariably poor. *Bachelorette* fans aren't going to understand you, and other professors are going to harrumph. And let's be honest here: these people are English professors, which means they probably weren't always the most popular kids in school, even if there was a sort of begrudging respect for them. Who can blame them, now that they've found their places and cultivated some confidence, for writing about stuff that makes them feel hip? The faux populism that the *Baffler* unmasks seems somewhat less manipulative, and less offensive, when recast in the light of a bunch of rarefied academics who desperately want to feel plugged in. A bunch of rarefied academics who are constantly asked what they're for.

At the end of my talk with Kim Emery, a friend of hers rushes into our subdivided ballroom and reports that Judith Butler—a gender theorist and gadfly at UC Berkeley—has been added to Panel #346, "Academic Freedom Post-9/11." I call Charlie to let him know; he got his doctorate at Berkeley and is a huge Butler fan. Politics is another arena that gets academics into relevance trouble. Either they're too irrelevant—the left grumbles about the pointlessness of their theoretical posturing—or they're too relevant—the right accuses them of indoctrination. Someone once told me that getting attacked from both sides means you're really doing something right, and I'm ready to see them doing something right.

All three panelists are stiff-jawed as commandos but also seem jaunty, and I'm not surprised that despite the seriousness of the topic they get some good laughs. Butler walks in late and goes right for the podium. She speaks with a clipped, angry-sounding NPR voice, and she waves her hands all over the place, pointing and gesticulating. She gives a dense thicket of a talk—probably better read than heard—about John Ashcroft's use of the word "sovereignty," and is both pointed and funny. She peppers the talk with anecdotes about threats to academic freedom she's witnessed at Berkeley, including stories about the withdrawal of federal funds for opposition to the Bush administration's policies. Miriam Cooke, a professor of Modern Arabic Literature at Duke with dyed platinum hair splotched with hot pink—which, I have to say, has an unexpected dignity to it—speaks next; she furnishes an account of the ways in which right-wing groups have attempted to purge critics of U.S. Middle East policy from departments like hers. She goes on at length about ACTA—the American Council of Trustees and Alumni—and its subsidiary organization, Campus Watch, which has published lists of dangerous and un-American professors. It's a true badge of distinction, she says dryly, to find oneself on that list, and most of the audience members nod vigorously and grin. One woman raises her hand and asks how one might get onto the list; she seems to want an email address or a convenient sign-up

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sheet. "Do something outrageous, it isn't very hard," replies Cooke. The University of Minnesota's Professor Ellen Messer-Davidow—a sparkling alloy of indulgent Jewish grandmother and hard-nosed Jewish mother—rounds out the panel with another cogent, theory-free indictment of governmental meddling. She eviscerates "targeted" federal grants—which reward scholars for having sympathetic views—for "undermining scholarly expertise, peer evaluation, and academic freedom."

There were two separate points made by the panelists. The first was a critique of the Bush administration, which was offered in accessible, jargon-free, bullshitless arguments. The second was a defense of academic freedom: the ability to work out scholarly issues in an environment untainted by politics. The former arguments were delivered by professors as citizens—citizens whose jobs had afforded them an audience, but citizens nonetheless. The latter arguments were delivered by professors who felt their work was jeopardized. All of the left-wing froth about the lack of public intellectuals in America, I think, confuses the obligations of these two roles—it's just one more attempt to flummox the professors into usefulness, to get them on a particular side, serving a particular public purpose. We may *hope* that some professors might use their status and visibility to contribute to political discussions in the public sphere—to write Op-Ed pieces and the like—but they're certainly under no obligation as professors to do so. No one laments the lack of public intellectuals among race-car drivers, and I'm sure there are some fiercely intelligent race-car drivers. The call for more engaged public intellectuals is just one more oblique reiteration of the demand that English professors justify themselves: how about you folks get up off the faculty-lounge La-Z-Boy and make yourselves helpful around here?

The academic-freedom issue is scary and ominous, and it doesn't take much to get caught up in the gathering squall of paranoia. Messer-Davidow has impressed me, and I'm interested in talking with her further; after she grills me about my background (not a fundamentalist, not a Your Republican), my credentials (I have none), and my purposes (none of those either, really), she agrees. As we're leaving the panel, a short frumpy man with an unkempt mustache and beady eyes walks up to us and starts asking questions about Messer-Davidow's political projects. She lights a cigarette, drags deeply in a fine Mrs. Robinson sort of way, and peers down at the name and affiliation on his badge. Her eyes turn to reptilian slits. She asks which department he's in, and he answers with a stutter.

"Oh, do you know Professor S——-?" she asks. The name she mentions is famous enough that even I've heard it in passing. The mustachioed man smooths his eyebrows with his fingers, spackling his eyebrow-dandruff in a carnivalesque white line leading toward his ears.

"No, I don't think I know him, although the name sounds familiar," he says.

It was some sort of test, I think, and the man floundered. Messer-Davidow walks away quickly; though she's unruffled, my alarm bells are screaming. The man presses on, actually skipping alongside us as we talk while moving with the evening throng toward the Hyatt, and continues to ask her about politics. She deflects the questions; I give him a mean look. Eventually, the man skulks away. I see him once again the next day and he looks ever more rumpled and unpredictable, so I hide behind a Texas Longhorn linebacker, who's in town for a bowl game.

The tally of disquieting events mounts. I finish talking to Messer-Davidow about her next book and her prognosis for our political future, and walk back to the Marriott for Event #366, the *PMLA*—the *Publications of the MLA,* a prestigious journal—Wine & Cheese Reception, where I'm supposed to meet Charlie. Each evening, dozens of different groups offer social events in the form of cash bars: "Cash Bar Arranged by the Milton Society of America," "Cash Bar Arranged by the International Arthurian Society." If you're a savvy convention-goer, however, you know where they hide the open bars. Charlie prepared me well in advance for this, and has our open-bar itinerary mapped out. The event starts at 5:15; by the

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time I arrive at 5:30, most of the cheese is gone, which Charlie had warned me might happen. As Charlie and I orbit the small table, calculating who deserves how much of the steadily evaporating cheese, a short bald man approaches; he's wearing a green argyle vest and a maroon tie emblazoned with little shieldlike insignia. His nametag reads "DOD." Charlie steps backward away from the table and asks, "What does DOD stand for?"

"Department of Defense," says the man as he commands the remaining hunks of cheese. We both freeze for a minute before Charlie produces an anxious chuckle. "Oh, interesting. What are you, uh, up to here?"

"Oh, I'm a translator at DLI, the Defense Languages Institute, and I'm here for some, uh, workshops on translation." Charlie tries to mollify the man with an anecdote about his wife's failing a security clearance test at DLI as a teenager, but the man says nothing him and takes the rest of the cheese.

"Why'd you talk to that guy?" I ask Charlie. "He's probably uploading our names and pictures to some defense satellite right now." "And he took the rest of the cheese," Charlie says. Charlie and I spend the rest of the reception being nervous together at the wine bar; the hotel employee looks like he's going to cut us off.

Dinner is with a smattering of friends and acquaintances whose connection to Charlie remains vague. We eat an awful overpriced oceanside restaurant where the Caesar salad comes as four uncut leaves of romaine lettuce erupting sideways through a slab of charred toast. I sit next to an evidently eminent Lacanian woman who makes a lot of masturbation jokes and seems to look right through me, when she looks at me at all. Charlie and I leave dinner before the check comes and go to the UC Berkeley English Department party in a hotel suite, where I talk to a few anxious job-seekers while Charlie reunions. I talk to a man who won't tell me his name and won't tell me why. He tells me I can refer to him in my article as "Elvis," but only his creepiness is worth noting. We leave for the hotel around 11, and on the car ride home I try to trick Charlie into telling me Elvis's real name, but Charlie's onto me and won't fall for it. He's adamant that I take the bed again—I've developed a cold—and I'm grateful.

We stand there in the dark brushing our teeth to the rumbling sounds of more Cadillac Escalades coming and going to secret parties, and I'm feeling ruminative and oddly deflated.

"I came here looking to defend academics from the charges of academic excess and frippery," I say—or something like that. "And I feel like I have some good arguments: it's this self-contained world, so as long as the teaching's good and inventive and fair and mind-opening, the rest of us have no reason to care about scholarly obscurity or theory or jargon."

Charlie's half-listening to me, and half-watching college basketball, which is fine, because Charlie's not in San Diego to listen to me, and we've already spent fifty-odd continuous hours together. "But the thing is, I've spent most of my life not criticizing academics, but romanticizing them. The majesty of quiet contemplation, you know, an Athenian courtyard, the faint hum of transcendence pursued—I bought all of that stuff. Like being a professor meant being above the fray—on some higher plane where truth seeped downward into everyday life. I thought it was infinitely, unfathomably relevant, because it dealt with these essential concerns."

Charlie sort of grunts; he's a huge college basketball fan, and is very wrapped up in the game. "Yeah, I know what you mean," he says, and thinks I've finished. "How many PAC-10 teams, do you think, are going to make it to the tournament this year?"

"When I was talking to Kim Emery today, I so badly wanted her to tell me about this deep bond between her academic life and her personal life, that her job was all about working out in intellectual terms the issues that she confronts in her personal life. Go to work in the morning, seize this transcendent truth, come home and put it into practice." I paused and Charlie looked up at me and then back at the game.

"So now, I can defend you guys by saying you do some obscure

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niche-work and write for your own community and it's not necessarily relevant and it's not really useful, but there's a kind of beauty to it anyway and we're probably all better off that at least someone is living the life of the mind, even if it seems like outer space sometimes. But it's punctured all kinds of mythologies I once had about academia as this sublime place."

The game cuts to a commercial and Charlie turns to me. "Well, I don't know, it's like caring about PAC-10 basketball. They don't really stack up with the rest of the country, they usually don't do that well in March, it's kind of its own universe, but it's still awesome. You're better off taking the shots you can make, you know?"

DAY 3: Monday December 29

In the morning, I attend a follow-up panel on the Publishing and Tenure Crisis, which is more of the same: corporatization of the university, shrinking of the humanities, the managerial mentality, etc. I wander back to the Hyatt for Panel #505, "Teaching in the Postcanonical Age." Lots of attacks on the academy—from Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* to Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*—have centered around political brainwashing in the classroom, and this is where charges of academic irrelevance deteriorate into charges of outright irresponsibility. Where academics go from silly-but-harmless to arch and malefic. Charlie had spent an hour the previous day telling me about his role on the board of the homeowner's association in his homogeneous Tucson subdivision: he spent weeks of careful diplomacy in a campaign to convince his neighbors that it might be okay for people to fly national flags that aren't American ones. He won, and is proud of the victory. After hearing about his pride in that small but hard-won triumph, the very idea of the same Charlie sneaking lessons in Marxist insurrection into a class on Ralph Ellison or Don DeLillo was so outlandish and insulting, I had to see whether other professors were pushing politics in the classroom.

All three speakers at the teaching panel agree that promoting a particular political ideology inside the classroom would be a betrayal of their profession. As literature readers and critics, they're supposed to foment ambiguity, critical thinking, and the upheaval of sedimented opinion. One impetuous young woman stands up and asks a panelist, "But aren't you making your students into conservatives? You're just rattling their cages if you're not teaching them politics." The panelist looks at her as though she's asked a question about how one might go about teaching radical politics on the Moon, and it appears that he'd rather blind himself than resort to classroom demagoguery. It's possible, I'll admit, that I'm a sucker, that their course packets burst with fiery samizdat, but I honestly believe that most of these professors wouldn't be able to sleep at night if they used the classroom—an arena built around the idea of dispute for its own sake—for political hucksterism. After all, this is why we demand that our professors be people who challenge received wisdom rather than just propagate it: only people who have demonstrated their own imaginative strengths should be permitted to help nurture young imaginations. This extends to critical theory, as well. At one point, Charlie remarked to me, "You may be a Marxist or a Freudian or a poststructuralist or a postcolonialist as a scholar, but when you teach undergrads, most people are just going to employ some admixture of good old-fashioned close reading and good old-fashioned historicism."

All of which is not to say that there is no cause for a certain kind of right-wing concern. These professors are not just teachers, they're examples. Their very lives show how one might choose to live and work as a member of an autonomous community, beyond the pale of the market and the corporation, professionally obliged only to those who share the same standards, passions, and idiosyncratic fantasies. When Indiana University saw a 20 percent drop in its humanities enrollment a few years ago, deans plastered the campus with a series of ads depicting android types in business suits. The captions read: "Okay, then. Live your dreams in the next life." And: "Yeah, like your parents are so happy." The ultimate justification for the continued existence of the

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humanities—the big dramatic answer to what the humanities are for—is they aren't *for* anything, at least not in the usual senses. Their use lies in the reminder that there is a certain grandeur in speculative withdrawal, that there are still refuges—and this sounds terribly corny, but it's true, and it's important—where reflection trumps activity. A professor who studies metaphors of hydrophilia in Medieval Ukrainian folk ballads isn't just teaching her students about those ballads; she's teaching her students that it's possible to live a life devoted to something as ostensibly trifling and pointless as metaphors of hydrophilia in Medieval Ukrainian folk ballads just because you love it and have found others who love it, too. She's teaching that what seems meaningless may be a source of enchantment and connection, that our obsessive fervors may yet go unmuted.

As San Francisco State University's Professor Sol Steier put it, "I have a moral obligation as a teacher to work against efficiency as best I can," and the idea is not to demean the George Babbitts in gray flannel suits, although that does happen, but to exemplify an alternative. And this is where the dark hollow of anti-academic unrest is laid bare: critics of the academy are not really afraid of explicit political indoctrination, they're afraid of these preserves of communal autonomy. They're afraid of the flowering of the arcane, the unmarketable, the unprofitable. They're afraid that their children will become scruffy bohemian types.

It makes sense, then, that the last really big event of the conference—#585, "Is Now the Time for Paul de Man?"—feels like a resounding celebration of that communal autonomy and collective idiosyncrasy. Paul de Man was a Yale professor from Belgium whose writings in the seventies and early eighties catapulted deconstruction to the top of the theoretical heap, and launched his reputation as a sort of Gene Simmons of the academy—a little controversial, a little over the top, definitely cheesy and overblown in a seventies-ish sort of way, but a quintessential rock star nonetheless. He died in 1983; a few years later, someone dug up some Nazi collaborationist writing he'd done for a Belgian newspaper during the war, and it became a big conflagration. The scandal was used as a way for critics of the academy to dishonor the professoriate. "See?" they sneered. "Being a deconstructionist is one tiny step removed from being a Nazi." It was the perfect link between professor-as-political-menace and professor-as-hopeless-obfuscator. So it's not surprising that even now, twenty years after his death and fifteen after the scandal, the MLA is still trying to come to grips with de Man.

The subdivided ballroom is as packed as, well, a rock concert. There are upwards of five hundred people here—easily the most at any single event—all dressed up in their ecru scarves and horn-rims, lined up three-deep along the walls, necks craned and heads nodding furiously; it occurs to me, to take this rock analogy one step further, that the constant nodding ("Oh, but of course, I am understanding you *perfectly*") is like a restrained form of headbanging. Everyone looks healthier and more stylish than anyone I've seen all weekend. Even the panelists are sartorially impressive: Ian Grant Balfour of York University in Toronto looks as distinguished as his name sounds, with thick black rectangular auteur glasses and a charcoal blazer over a tight black turtleneck. Mark Hansen of Princeton is the tallest man I've seen at the whole conference, at least eight or eleven feet tall, and is wearing a neon yellow shirt. Gayatri Spivak is cloaked in a radiant red sari. Lindsay Waters, an executive editor at Harvard University Press, is sort of short and has neither cool glasses nor a red sari, but he's a publisher, not an academic.

The actual papers delivered are so bizarre and freakish and sodden with jargon as to make them utterly incomprehensible. But it is a truly virtuosic incomprehensibility that makes sense only as a kind of poetic performance. It is an incomprehensibility that defies all notions of accessibility to outsiders, a gala event high up in the penthouse of the ivory tower. It's an incomprehensibility that affirms the professors' power to decide for themselves what counts and what is meaningful in their world, an

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incomprehensibility that reclaims Paul de Man as someone important to them for their own private reasons. The de Man they remember was de Man the scholar, not de Man the Nazi, and they thus reinscribe in thick confident lines the boundaries of who they are. Those lines declare that de Man the scholar was not and will never be accountable as a scholar for what he said and did in the political sphere, just like de Man the citizen was not and will never be held accountable in public for what he wrote in the scholarly sphere. To the general public, the panelists assert: you may hold us accountable when we write Op-Ed pieces, you may obviously hold us accountable as teachers, but when we write for other scholars we answer only to other scholars. To the right-wing critics: you may hold us accountable for our political views as citizens and as educators, but our political views and our scholarly arts may not for your purposes be wedded.

The night before, I had spoken with one grad student who studies Hawthorne. When he tells people that, they say, "Oh, sure, I read *The Scarlet Letter* in tenth grade." "It's no wonder," he said, "that deconstruction and other fashionable theories have caught on so hard in nineteenth-century American lit. It takes a subject that everyone thinks they know everything about and makes it sexier, gives a new and exciting way to read it." In other words, it makes it their own again. It's not as though they have some exclusive ecclesial privilege over the material, it's just that they've spent years and years reading everything that's ever been written about Hawthorne, so, yes, in some unmagical and undivine way, it is very much *theirs*. The fact that we all speak English doesn't mean that they're doing something any of us could pick up casually in our spare time.

So as much as I want to grab the panelists by their modish lapels and shake them and demand to know exactly what the hell they're talking about, it is not my right to do so, for I am not there by invitation, I am not a member of their community, and I have no right to expect that their words should mean anything to me. I still think their tortured, overwrought sentences are for the most part patently absurd, and when Mark Hansen refers to the film *Memento* as an example of "retentional finitude in a particularly acute form"—which is immediately before he talks about "the breakdown of cinema as a temporal object"—I recoil. But I don't recoil because I think they are maiming the English language or making a big deal out of stupid things. I recoil because their absurdities no longer seem sublime: I no longer think their language is cool, their community Olympian, their idiosyncrasies magisterial. Their language isn't jargon, it's slang. Their pursuits are neither irrelevant nor transcendent, they're peculiar—and fantastic, in the true sense of the word. The mood around me is triumphant.

I meet up with Charlie and his friends after the de Man panel, and we walk over to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reception, another open bar Charlie's been talking about since Friday. We will be attending a panel the next morning to see Charlie's friend Eric give a talk, but the conference is winding to a close. I'm talking to a woman who told me she had gone to grad school because she thought being a professor would be a good way to support herself while she finished her novel; then she tells me that she's only looking for jobs in New York, because that's where her therapist is. Charlie pokes me and points to a short man who looks a little like a turtle prowling around near the door, and indicates that it is Scott McLemee, the writer of the "Signifyin'" parody. I introduce myself to McLemee, who's avuncular and kind, and ask why his piece—an obvious satire—provoked such hostility and defensiveness.

He says he was surprised by the reaction; as far as he is concerned, professors who write that sort of paper title are asking for the attention. It signifies their lust for engagement, he tells me. "People want it both ways. They want to feel like they're part of a clerisy, but they also want to feel like they're part of the public sphere. I certainly would never underestimate the desire to have it both ways, but in the end you're going to do one or the other. You're either going to be talking in a hermetic way about

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things that are only of interest to others who carry your specialized interest—and there's nothing wrong with that, that's fine—but then you're going to be subject to being thought to be ivory-tower and not really part of the public conversation. Or you're going to have like 'Dude, Where's My Reliable Symbolic Order?' as your paper title and be writing about *The Sopranos* and trying to be a hipster."

McLemee's point is that the really clumsy things—the aspects of the MLA worth ridiculing, the sitting ducks—are a result of professors trying to be both at the same time. There's no reason why these people can't spend their days speaking hermetically as ivory-tower scholars, and then spend their weekends as *Sopranos*-watching hipsters. Charlie does it, and he doesn't see any radical discontinuity in his own life; he just sees himself writing some pieces for other professors, some pieces for the indie-rock kids, and some pieces for the flag-waving xenophobes in Tucson. Professors like Elaine Chang contort themselves trying to kill two birds with one unwieldy stone, and it's a grisly sight.

We come down hard on academics because on some level we all intuit the stupefying magnificence of their jobs. It's not as though they're sleeping on a pile of money—the average English prof makes about $55,000 a year, and most beginning tenure-track positions pay barely $40,000—or even living in the most glamorous places—Charlie never thought he'd be living in a lily-white Tucson subdivision—but they do keep pretty attractive hours, they spend a lot of time reading books, and, most importantly, they don't answer to any authority other than that of the community they've chosen to join. They don't have to genuflect to other people's notions of what's worthwhile and what's not. We call them irrelevant and haughty at least in part because we're jealous of their insularity.

But if we put down their irrelevance, we're even more savage when they try too hard to be relevant: when the ivory-tower hermenaut writes about the *Sopranos* or poor Trista. Because as much as we whine about them, we know that their aloofness is a stately and effulgent thing, and it's disconcerting when they abandon it. It's sad when they lose faith in it. It destroys the solace we take—whether we realize it or not—in their purity. All of us, I think, would rather they be elliptically profound than banally useful. And though it turned out that the English professors weren't as preternatural as I'd once thought and hoped—they weren't up above, they were somewhere way off to the side, staking out their misty marginal terrain—there was nonetheless a faint tremor of heroism in the air, and I was glad it was their field day, not mine.