Expect Delays: Procrastination and the Graduate Student

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My experience of graduate school began, in a sense, with an act of procrastination. Back when I was an undergraduate, I simultaneously moonlighted as a professional dishwasher, and, as I attempted to juggle this (what seemed to me) hard labour with my first year of study and its attendant classes, assignments, and social obligations, I began to form an image of university life as delightfully utopian—an image that seemed particularly resonant on those nights when I had to wallow elbow deep in dirty suds for twelve hours at a time. I remember quite vividly one particularly rough night at work, harried by demanding waiters and buried beneath piles of dirty dishes, someone asking me "What I wanted to do with my life." My answer came as if premeditated, even though I can't recall ever having formulated it before: I wanted to get a PHD in English and become a professor. Simply put, I think, I desperately wanted to *delay*, for as long as humanly possible, the necessity of working a job I didn't like.

Of course, from the ostensibly more "enlightened" vantage point afforded by a rudimentary education in critical theory, I now recognize this perspective as a rather naïve valorization of the "life of the mind," an idealist view premised on a misrecognition of the complex material and ideological entanglement of intellectual and bodily forms of labour in

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a late capitalist economy. At the same time, though, I would argue that graduate work nonetheless maintains a close (if vexed) connection with the originary procrastinatory urge I detect in this late-teenaged romanticization of academe. As philosopher Mark Kingwell has astutely noted, "[G]raduate school in the humanities is an especially acute site of procrastination," fertile—or perhaps toxic—ground for the latter's "intricate mixture of self-justification and self-loathing," its "self-defeating spirals of defensible deferral" (364). The prime mover in this anxious universe is, as Kingwell observes, the doctoral dissertation: a large and difficult project "with an unspecific deadline, which is to say no deadline at all," and which, as a result, "feels at once pressing and pointless" (368). On the one hand, "there is too much to do, the important task … too big to tackle" (Kingwell 365): the dissertation—particularly in the halting middle stages in which I currently find myself—simply seems too Sisyphean a task to complete. There is no way for you to sit down and, as in the famous advertising slogan, "Just do it," and the intermittent realization of this apparent fact tends to make *any* work seem rather pointless or futile, thus heightening the attraction of other more pleasant or practicable diversions. On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, the relatively elastic time frame in which the project is to be completed—say two to four years for the dissertation itself—means that for a large part of the process nothing necessarily *feels* all that pressing, and thus everything becomes relatively easy to put off for one more day. Graduate school—and, more particularly, the dissertation-writing process—thus might be said to consist in a continual oscillation between a nearly existential despair (I'll never finish anyway, so what's the use) and a flippant nonchalance (It'll get done; may as well go have a beer), a kind of procrastinatory dialectic whose synthesis is, all too often, "stasis" (Kingwell 365). Complicating matters is the fact that successful graduate work is to a large extent reliant on self-motivation and self-surveillance, meaning that there are few "external constraints" (Kingwell 369) in place to keep the errant procrastinator on the straight and narrow, except, perhaps, in the form of various "secondary" tasks endemic to graduate school, whose "primary" goal is ostensibly the completion of a thesis. These tasks—I'm thinking of, say, teaching or "TA-ing," committee work, attending conferences, and polishing work for possible publication—tend at once to appear more pressing (since they involve the expectations of others) and slightly more straightforward to accomplish, thus encouraging the "deferral of action" that Richard Beardsworth locates at the etymological root of the verb "to procrastinate" (10).

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All of which would seem to suggest a rather pejorative view of procrastination as a pathological condition in close kinship with other forms of "abnormal" or self-destructive behaviour.[1] Indeed, according to the editors of a special edition of the journal *Parallax* on this very topic, procrastination tends to be viewed by most people as an intractable *problem*: "a waste, unproductive or counterproductive, inefficient, deleterious, a not doing—an undoing: an affront to a set of unquestionable metaphysical values or messianic telos" (Bowman, Crawford, and Rowley 2). And yet, while it might seem to represent a pathological deviation from the "norm" of effective scholarship, a threatening other that menaces the intellect from the outside, procrastination is, it could be argued, absolutely intrinsic to graduate study, and to humanities and social sciences scholarship in general, not simply as an unpleasant but inevitable side effect of such work—its waste product—but as, ironically, one of its enabling conditions. Obviously, on a certain level, graduate work in English (and other disciplines) is an exacting form of intellectual labour, requiring dedication, hard work, self-sacrifice, and so on. Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that, at least in my personal experience, such labour is *necessary but not sufficient* and that, from time to time, hard work really only takes you so far—far enough for you merely to be spinning your wheels in a dispiriting combination of exhaustion and unproductiveness. (The usual scenario for me in this case involves sitting staring at a screen for hours at a time, producing quantities of work in inverse proportion to the rising tension in my shoulders.) Indeed, in a somewhat ironic reversal, "working hard" here starts to appear at such moments as almost indistinguishable from wasting time, if not procrastination itself. At such times, I find that "putting off" the work (until tomorrow, say) can be the wisest and most productive course of action: a way of clearing the head in order to enable a fresh start at some point in the future. Thus, if graduate study (and perhaps mental labour in general) inevitably depends on a series of highly complex and at times unpredictable negotiations between productivity and its deferral, then procrastination can no longer be defined as a species of absolute

1 Kingwell, for instance, argues that "procrastination's closest relative is actually addiction" and that the "pleasure of putting things off" can produce "a clear head rush, at once comforting and wickedly exhilarating, like the first sip of a cold gin martini" (371, 372). Similarly, Moore draws attention to the cultural convention by which procrastination is stigmatized as a kind of illicit, slightly shameful pleasure: the "*OED* declares procrastination to be a *habit*, and cites the opinion of the ages to the effect that it is an exceedingly *bad* habit. Not unlike masturbation" (57).

inactivity or "idleness" but becomes, as Mike Gane suggests, a potentially active, agential "strategy" in its own right (14).

Examples of procrastination as a productive tactic of deferral or displacement rather than a form of self-defeating "indecision" (Gane 13) abound in the life of the average graduate student. Writing a dissertation (or, for that matter, a term paper) would be virtually unthinkable without occasionally deferring work on certain sections or chapters which, for whatever reason, do not seem to be coming easily. For instance, in the context of my own project, I have twice tried (and, to this point, failed) to finish the introduction, a particularly problematic structural component that at once demands early completion in connection with some vague ideal of linear argumentation and seems impossible to complete without first figuring out exactly what you want to say—in other words, without writing much of the rest of the dissertation. However, in this sense, it is precisely by seemingly procrastinating—avoiding one task (slaving over the introduction) by engaging in another (forging ahead on chapter 2)—that you generate the necessary ideas and material that will enable you to attempt task one with (ideally) more confidence further down the track.

But perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that putting things off comprises a key facet of the graduate student's intellectual methodology, since, from a certain perspective, procrastination appears to comprise English Studies' disciplinary *raison d'être*. Just as, according to Zygmunt Bauman, the procrastinator's objective is to put off "the termination of the procrastination itself" (4), narrative itself is similarly engaged in extending itself through time by means of an interminable process that Stephen D. Moore refers to as the "deferral of the pleasurable unpleasure of an ending" (56). In other words, narrative only exists insofar as it *keeps going*, even as it also, inevitably, needs (ostensibly) to point toward a telos in order to exist in the first place.[2] Similarly, insofar as effective literary criticism—even as it argues for a "thesis" or elaborates a rigorously defined

2 Ross Chambers's delightful neologism for literary texts that self-consciously reflect on their own mechanisms of deferral is "loiterature." For Chambers, an exemplary "loiterly" text like Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, with its endless convolutions and refusal to get to the point, blurs the lines between "innocent pleasure taking and harmless relaxation and not-so-innocent 'intent'—a certain recalcitrance to the laws that maintain 'good order.'" What seems like "a mere passing of the time in idle observations" can thus mask "an implied social criticism," a critique of "the distinctions on which social order depends" (9, 8). While procrastination and loitering may not be strictly identical—the latter is a determined idleness, while, as we have seen, procrastination tends to imply an unproductive *busyness*—they both exist in an ambiguous relation to the "norm" of productivity.

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thematic like "procrastination"—tends to expand exponentially the ways in which a given text may be read, it becomes complicit in this narrative deferral of final completion or consummation; even when the story does end, we always need to read it *again* (and again). Ideally dialogic in nature, criticism responds to the text (and to other critics' responses) as a way of prolonging the production of meaning, thereby also providing continual justification for its own existence. If this image of a feedback loop calls to mind the cultural commonplace of the scholar as parasitic, self-involved, arid, irrelevant—George Eliot's Casaubon, for instance, or the legions of professors James Joyce imagined poring over (and pawing at) *Ulysses* for centuries to come—much contemporary critical theory reassures us that the deferral of an ending, or, in deconstructive terms, of the final attainment of stable meaning in the form of the transcendental signified, is not merely an unavoidable "condition of knowledge itself" (Young 8) but something of an ethico-critical imperative. Procrastination as a form of *différance*, then: a kind of untimely thinking that resists epistemological closure and the dubious allure of "grand narratives, progress, emancipation, liberation, revolution, utopias" (Young 7) and that, in thus refusing to subject the future-to-come to any determinate program, leaves open a space for the (im)possibility of uncolonized difference, otherness, justice, hospitality, and so on. Procrastination here becomes another name for a deconstructive politics, whose slogan admonishes: "Slow down or democratic time will be lost" (Gane 17).[3]

Such reflections on procrastination's critical potential might seem not to have all that much to do with the rather more mundane instances of deferral and displacement I outlined earlier. There may, then, be a contra-

3 A particularly suggestive articulation of the relation between procrastination and a kind of ethics may be found in Slavoj Žižek's *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Here, Žižek critiques what he calls the "fake sense of urgency that pervades the left-liberal humanitarian discourse on violence." The multitudinous problems of the modern world—genocide, racism, famine, poverty, ecological catastrophe, and so on—seem to cry out for an active, immediate response ("There is no time to reflect: we have to act *now*," goes the refrain [6]). Conversely, a discourse that (like literary study, perhaps) "offers no clear solution, no 'practical' advice on what to do … usually meets with reproach." However, Žižek contends that procrastinating by refusing the dictates of practicality is precisely what needs to be done: "There are situations when the only truly 'practical' thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately and to 'wait and see' by means of a patient critical analysis" (7). Underlying Žižek's argument here is the notion that the obvious, material manifestations of violence that are usually mobilized in such calls to action—what Žižek calls "subjective" violence—work to mystify the more profound structural or "objective" violence that in fact constitutes "the 'normal,' peaceful state of things" (1–2).

diction between the theoretical elevation of procrastination to the level of critical praxis, on the one hand, and the often quite material exigencies of life as a graduate student, on the other. The sources of funding that sometimes determine whether or not the timely completion of a dissertation is feasible, for instance, often depend, to a certain extent, on a candidate's ability to demonstrate the broader social utility or relevance of his or her project, its potential as "practical cultural knowledge" (Bowman, Crawford, and Rowley 2). Moreover, in a cultural climate in which "discipline, method, organization, rationality, productivity, and, above all, work" are privileged, seemingly self-evident categories (Chambers 9)—not to mention a political climate in which the current federal government's 2009 budget makes provision for "additional" SSHRC funding on the condition that it be "focused on business-related degrees," and SSHRC itself responds by strategically emphasizing the "benefit[s]" for the "business world" of research in the social sciences and humanities more generally (quoted in Wells)—procrastinating might not seem like the wisest course of action for graduate students confronting the exigencies of decreasing wages, skyrocketing rents, and an anemic job market. If we admit that our work inevitably has something to do with procrastination then, perhaps, we also unwittingly further the political agenda of those who need no more encouragement to "put off" providing support for something as ostensibly "impractical" as literary or cultural study. And if we balk somewhat at the underlying logic here, which seems to entail (or even encourage) what Alan Liu identifies as the ongoing "merger between academic humanities 'research' … and corporate, government, media, medical, and military knowledge work" (6), we might also want to consider more closely procrastination's ideological overdetermination. As Nicole Shukin reminded us in a previous *English Studies in Canada* Readers' Forum ("Why Do I Have to Read Like That?"), our supposed modes of procrastination—such as "the recreational time of reading"—are themselves forms of labour that are always already bound up in "a knowledge or information economy," in a relation that tends to be mystified by the perpetuation of "an aestheticized image" of such activities as a purely "subversive pleasure" (23, 24). Seen from this perspective, our discipline engages in a potentially critical procrastination only to the extent that our procrastinating is also itself a kind of disciplining.

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