

Introduction: Academic Rites of Passage

Michael O'Driscoll
University of Alberta

These are
the passages of thought
from the light air
into the heavy flesh
until from the burning
all the slumb'ring dark
matter comes alight

Robert Duncan
"Rites of Passage I"

NEVER ONE TO MISS A PRODUCTIVE (and sometimes groan-worthy) pun, American poet Robert Duncan in his "Rites of Passage" sequence plays upon the relation between the celebration of change and the inscription of the written word as two kinds of "passage" that are inextricably woven together. Every writing is a kind of ritualistic gesture; every ritual an archive of transformation. To put our thoughts into words is alchemical in the sense that language enacts, performs, and sometimes even effects change and Duncan—perhaps one of the world's great scholar/poets—knew well that rites of passage were central to every intellectual and creative exercise. It is no surprise, then, that the academic institution abounds in rituals of change, for education and scholarship are first and foremost—or at least, I would argue, they should be—about transformation.

MICHAEL O'DRISCOLL
is the Editor of *ESC*:
English Studies in
Canada.

At the same time, rites of passage in the academy serve other purposes: not only do they establish hierarchies and power structures but they also help to secure important relations and forge the bonds of community. We're all familiar with the more formal rituals of the academy, from initiation to graduation and through the various ranks of professionalization and promotion; however, more informal rituals are also commonplace experiences: social events, and their rich forms of public acceptance and humiliation, as well as more private passages such as the thrill of wakening to a vocation and the sobering reality of that first letter of rejection. In all of these cases, rituals speak to both overt values and unspoken presuppositions about the work and relations of the academy; the ceremonial, after all, is always as much about inclusion as exclusion.

Contributors to this *ESC* Readers' Forum, and to the 2012 ACCUTE roundtable from which it is derived, were invited to think about rites of passage in the academy in this most overt sense, but we also encouraged them to stretch the implications of "rites of passage" to include whatever this phrase might invoke: for example, questions of *passing*, of performance and acceptance in whatever capacity, or, as in the Duncan poem above, considerations of the *passage* as a body of text that demands certain rituals of writing or reading. As with any lively topic of conversation, and in the hands of insightful thinkers such as those who follow here, the invitation to consider academic rites of passage drew much of immediate and pressing relevance into the orbit of its dark matter. While ostensibly focused on the rituals that govern the community we share as professional educators and scholars, these colleagues lead us into consideration of so much that merits further discussion: instrumentalist views of education, the Quebec student protests, the slumping academic job market, language education and Canadian bilingualism, bloated administrations divorced from the realities of front-line education, early retirement, and professional hierarchies.

Reading these passages, it seems the whole world—or at least the whole academic world—is captured in the gesture of ritual. Indeed, the rites of passage that lead us to those concerns are to be found at all stages of the academic career, from graduate studies to retirement, and everything in between. We're fortunate, then, that in the following pages that full spectrum of experience is well represented by our contributors, and *ESC* is grateful, as always, to share this space with colleagues who, in presenting their work as either the light air of conference presentations or the heavy flesh of print and pixel, demonstrate their commitment to bringing dark matter to light.