

Passing Among

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THERE IS NO BYZANTIUM ON OUR CAMPUSES where we can stand and watch whatever is past, or passing, or to come, although some of us may feel that we do during such holy fire rites-of-passage moments as graduation or a newly granted tenure or CRC professorship. We might even sing to ourselves a chorus of George Gershwin's "They Can't Take That Away From Me," forgetting that Fred Astaire was singing only about memories and not reflecting that something would someday take those away too. In the academy retirement, whether mandatory, voluntary, or from gentle decanal pressure, transforms both tenure and rank to memories. A last rite of passage. Suddenly one is last in line even for SSHRC's locally administered travel grants. Time also transforms other apparent certainties to memory—the New Criticism, archetypal criticism, area studies, thematic criticism, identity politics. Before long postcolonial studies and diasporic literatures may also have become parts of periodized memory. The writing's on the wall, as a current and soon to be forgotten Dulux paint commercial tells us, borrowing Lenka's already aging music. At least the proto-diasporic Daniel seems still to have longevity, reminding us that passage is always passage from, and passage among, as well as passage to.

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Many academic passings onward are also passings from and usually involve more complex choices than those standard academic rituals of passage such as graduation, publication, tenure, or promotion. Passings to an administrative position are one of these, often thought of, or feared, as an abandonment of research or an admission that one wasn't the ambitious scholar or committed teacher one had appeared to be. Retirement is another, particularly early retirement, or any less-than-late retirement in jurisdictions in which mandatory retirement dates have been eliminated. Is it an admission that one hadn't really enjoyed teaching, or enjoyed the company of one's colleagues, or agreed with the directions one's field was taking?

Accepting a position at another university—a “rival” university—is another, sometimes perceived by one's colleagues as an abandonment, a betrayal, or even an insult. When a colleague once left York University for Western, for example, the late Norman Feltes commented that he could understand one leaving York, “but for *Western*?” he asked. “For *Western*?” Passage to, in Norman's view, might be a passage down, or a passage back, or a passage toward self-interest and away from collegiality. In our profession self-interest is not nearly as desirable a thing to display as a willingness to work “for the good of the department,” or “for the interests of our students,” “for the future of our profession,” or the “excellence” of the university. Such moments of passage can render ambiguous many of the pieties that underpin the everyday functioning of a department. Although we usually hold a party and collectively buy a gift, nevertheless.

Another complex passing occurs when one leaves—or takes on—a task of seemingly indefinite term. I was president of ACCUTE at the time that Doug Wurtele and Carleton University were approaching the end of their editorial and administrative roles with *English Studies in Canada*. The executive received proposals from Mary Jane Edwards and Carleton and from a team at the University of Alberta for the journal's continuance. Some of us had concern that distribution costs could rise if the journal were to be distributed from outside of Ontario and its inter-university transit service. Some saw the Carleton proposal as offering a continuation of Doug's careful eclecticism and of the requirement that contributors be ACCUTE members, and the Alberta one as constituting a swerve toward cultural and postcolonial studies and a welcoming of contributions by non-members. The two proposals were so dissimilar that it appeared that something would be lost no matter which were chosen. What was possibly at stake here was the passage of ACCUTE itself to a new genera-

tion of scholars—something which became clearer five years later when a similar Alberta proposal for *ESC* was accepted.

Passage to a new generation is often the subtext of such passings and passages, whether passage to a new critical paradigm or passage away from the likelihood of a travel grant. Like the *ESC* editors of 2003 when they adopted a dramatically new format, I prefer not to blur the moments of passage. I admire Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster for terminating Contact Press rather than passing it on younger poets, and F. R. Leavis for terminating *Scrutiny* when he no longer wished to edit it. Institutional passages are less easy to regulate, although a specific editorial period of a magazine can often be distinguished from the others—Harriet Monroe’s with *Poetry*, George Woodcock’s with *Canadian Literature*, Edward Van Aelstyn’s with *Northwest Review*. Some acts can be hard to follow—hard to see past, hard to surpass—and easier than others to historicize.

There’s another passage on which I think it may be appropriate to end—early passage out of the academy, usually preceded by passages that didn’t happen, many of them marked by those “thank you for applying” letters of which some of us have had to sign too many. Or passage into decades of sessional or part-time university teaching. *He passed from men’s memory in l’an trentiesme / De son eage*. These passages remind us that ours—despite the obligatory displays of selflessness I mentioned earlier and current emphases on collaborative research—is an emphatically hierarchical profession, in which the economics of postgraduate education, seemingly designed to overproduce graduates, inexpensively staff courses, and underproduce well-paying jobs, creates a continuing scene of competition in which the gap between a Canada Research Chair and years of renewed part-time appointments is one produced less by ability than by economic downturns and upturns, political savvy, skill at resisting depression, and chance occurrences. Change, or should I say “passage,” has continued to involve mostly individual passage toward places in the hierarchy—or elaborations of the hierarchy. Is this an acceptable situation? It may be for many. But it’s one that has been so seldom reviewed in the past century that it is difficult to pass judgement.

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acceptable
situation?

