Getting Around To It: Revaluing Procrastination

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In 2007, *ESC* developed the fortunate habit of sponsoring panels at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English, the parent association of this journal. In each case (Stephen Slemon's 2007 roundtable on "Why do I have to write like that?" and Cecily Devereux's 2008 roundtable on "Why do I have to read like that?"), the contributors subsequently returned to their papers to produce an *ESC* Readers' Forum on the same subject. We've done so again, and enhanced versions of 2009's contributions to the ACCUTE roundtable on "Procrastination" follow. As in previous years, the roundtable proved to be a lively and well-attended intellectual event. This time around that success was due not only to some truly engaging and thoughtful presentations from our panelists but also to the electricity sparked by the interdisciplinary contribution of respondent Professor Timothy A. Pychyl, an Associate Professor of Psychology at Carleton University and Director of the internationally recognized Procrastination Research Group. Crossing over, expertise in hand, onto the unfamiliar terrain of humanities-based cultural critique, Professor Pychyl foregrounded the pragmatic concerns of social scientists engaged with what can sometimes be self-limiting or even self-destructive behaviours and thereby threw into relief our discipline's

ESC 34.2–3 (June/September 2008): 1–3

tendency to view with skepticism the conceptual frameworks of social (and especially clinical) practices.

At the outset, our contributors were invited to consider the idea of procrastination and its histories, politics, representations, and practices. The panelists were asked to present a brief statement on the topic, keeping in mind that because procrastination is a serious issue for everyone—and in particular for academic students and professionals whose sometimes unstructured but ongoing responsibilities require an unusual degree of self-motivation and determined will to reach fruition—it is often pathologized as a destructive cycle of anxiety and guilt, a cycle rooted in matters of unconscious repression, melancholy, and obstructive neuroses. Certainly, in literary discourse itself, characters paralyzed by a destructive inability to act abound—think Hamlet, to cite one obvious example. However, our panelists were also reminded that refusing to act when action is called for might also be considered in many other contexts: as a positive drive toward perfectionism, as a kind of pleasure, as a condition of knowledge and creativity, as a political response to conditions of labour, as a linguistic or rhetorical figure of deferral, as a deliberate politics of conservatism, as a strategy of resistance to the strictures of modernity, as a practised art of life, as a philosophical stance toward questions of temporality and the future, and so on. The result of these encouragements are the brief statements that follow.

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In writing this introduction, I'm reminded of a small emblem of procrastination that is safely tucked away in my box of special keepsakes. When I was a young and impressionable lad, my mother presented me with a small, stuffed circle of yellow felt with the purple letters "2 IT" affixed to one side. She told me, in what was clearly a lesson in self-fashioning, that she thought I might need to "get around to it." Very funny, Mom. These days, when I'm hard at work avoiding whatever responsibilities might be looming, I think of that plush pillow of gentle encouragement and measure it against the famous words of the incorrigible wit Mark Twain, who once quipped "Never put off until tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow." Very funny, Mark. All humour aside, these seem to me the twin poles between which leap the sparks of procrastination and its affective attendants: personal and professional commitments, emotional impulse and intellectual reason, memory and anticipation, encouragement and incorrigibility. In any event, I'm grateful to the contributors to that roundtable and this forum. In inviting each of these individuals to join this discussion, I was careful to ensure them that they were in no way implicated by its subject matter—that they'd been sought out on

the basis of a professional reputation for lively and engaging insight and not a reputation for delay. That turned out to be precisely the case: all of contributors have much worthwhile to say here, and not a single one of them missed our deadline.