

The Simulation of Academic Crisis; Or, Chicken Little Rules the Roost

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For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient ground to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile.

William Gibson, Pattern Recognition (2003)

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was travelling to a conference and had a long conversation with the businessman sitting next to me. I took all that he said with a very large pinch of salt (he told me, for instance, that he owned a major company that did a lot of business across North America but he was sitting in Economy Class next to a newly minted assistant professor in the Humanities—and I had the window seat). But the underlying logic of one of his remarks was sufficiently chilling that I have never forgotten it. We were talking about the many rounds of cuts to university budgets in Ontario and I was lamenting the impact on students who, I suggested, were getting less than they would have just five years earlier—libraries were falling out of date as book budgets were slashed, cutbacks in staff and faculty were reducing the support available to students, and increasing faculty workloads were eating into the time necessary for the research that keeps teaching current—while the administration actually seemed to be growing at some universities. His response went something like this:

The government knows all that. The administration will keep cutting faculty positions and student services, but only until they reach the point where any further cuts will cause the

university to fail. If they don't keep the university running, they'll lose their jobs; so, to protect themselves, they'll start trimming the fat in the administration and universities will become much more efficient. That's the goal.

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What struck me at the time was the Darwinian brutality of it all. In this scenario, there was no concern at all about the generation of students who would pay the price for this imagined war between two institutional bureaucracies (government versus university); the only goal was to force university administrations to evolve into sleeker, trimmer beasts, and to do so with the least possible supervision. No studies, no advice, no evaluation of the outcome—just create a crisis which, it is assumed, will provoke greater efficiency. In this vision of government thinking, the panopticon is no longer cost-effective, so instead we have a variant of television's reality series, *Survivor*: the survival of the fittest once the conditions have been set to be sufficiently hostile and challenging to pose a meaningful threat, or at least appear to be so.

Crisis is an attenuated feature of what Jean Baudrillard calls "simulation." In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (SED), he describes "simulation" as "the third-order simulacrum [which operates] on the structural law of value" (SED 50):

We pass from injunction to disjunction through the code, from the ultimatum to sollicitation, from obligatory passivity to models constructed from the outset on the basis of the subject's "active response," and this subject's involvement and "ludic" participation, towards a total environmental model made up of incessant spontaneous responses, joyous feedback and irradiated contacts. (SED 70–71)

"Crisis" is an especially productive term in "this universe of operational simulation, multi-stimulation and multi-response. This incessant test of successful adaptation" (SED 71). It solicits our "active response" but not our solution; crises are averted, deflected, or deferred, but always loom just over the horizon. Like "excellence" in Bill Readings' critique of that term's centrality to the contemporary university, "crisis" is an empty category that activates impulsive rather than ideological or analytical response.

The term "crisis" is everywhere in academic discourse these days, going beyond the "structural introduction of the threat of crisis to the functioning of the institution" (Readings 37) towards its integral simulation. It is perhaps especially familiar to those of us in Ontario who have long been hearing dire predictions of the double cohort that will begin to overwhelm our faculty-depleted universities in 2003; in one vivid mixed metaphor, the

double cohort “will not be a single crest, but a storm of waves crashing into our institutions” (Devine 5).¹ Since David C. Berliner’s and Bruce J. Biddle’s *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools*, there have been a number of publications on education that invoke the idea of the “manufactured crisis” in particular. But simulation is different from manufacture. Berliner and Biddle invoke a crisis that is “manufactured” in the spirit of “organized malevolence” by “government officials and their allies” (xi–xii). In the Baudrillardian schema, simulation is not the product of a plot by conspirators but an effect of “the structural law of value” (SED 50). While my travelling companion construed financial crisis in the universities as part of a government plot to provoke hyper-efficiency, it is possible to read that crisis instead as an effect of a wider sense of financial crisis to which the various Ontario governments were incessantly responding throughout the 1990s.

In their discussion of institutions in crisis, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri conclude, “In the general breakdown, then, the functioning of the institutions is both more intensive and more extensive. The institutions work even though they are breaking down—and perhaps they work all the better the more they break down” (197). While Hardt and Negri stress the breakdown of boundaries between the public and private domains, the stimulative effects of crisis motivate a particular kind of seepage across this boundary: uncompensated labour, long instrumental to the operation of the domestic sphere, is now solicited in the workplace. Thus, in the recession, employees were asked to work for less pay in order to keep their employers afloat, and now we have the more subtle extension of this strategy in increasing workloads as benefits and salaries barely keep pace with the rising cost of living and the steeply escalating cost of education. Institutions “work all the better the more they break down” because they become even more cost-effective by invoking a sense of crisis that motivates personal sacrifice to corporate need.²

I do not want to belabour the simulation of crisis that dominates the wider culture these days. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard theo-

1 The “double cohort” is a consequence of the Ontario government’s 1997 decision to phase out Grade 13; in 2003–04, Ontarians entering university will include the last students to take Grade 13 and the first to complete their high school education in Grade 12.

2 Crisis draws in part on what Lyotard terms terror: “the legitimization of ... power is based on its optimizing the system’s performance—efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games necessarily entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational ... or disappear” (xxiv).

rizes the relationship between simulation and the “discourse of crisis” (22); such works as Barry Glassner’s *Culture of Fear*, Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine*, and Berliner’s and Biddle’s *The Manufactured Crisis* explore manifestations of crisis in the U.S. context; and news programs are a powerful daily reminder that we inhabit a culture of/in crisis. What I would like to gesture towards here are some of the ways in which we might understand the pressures that have charged debates within English studies—over cultural studies, the literary canon, and the curriculum—by considering such debates in the context of the simulation of crisis. Moreover, I would like to suggest that the simulation of academic crisis thrives in part because it draws on two (apparently) competing notions in cultural history, namely modernity and postmodernity.

The “crisis of modernity” conventionally denotes the anxieties that arise from a sense that modernity sweeps away tradition, certainty, value, and predictability. What I shall term the “postmodernity of crisis” turns modernity’s threat into a guiding principle that promises individual freedom as well as capitalist success: everything changes rapidly to be responsive to changing social, technological, and economic imperatives. The “postmodernity of crisis” underpins such statements as those of Nova Scotia Senator Don Oliver:

I support Senator Bonnell when he says that there is a crisis in post-secondary education in Canada. However, while this crisis may have been precipitated or perhaps exacerbated by recent budget cuts, it has been looming for some time. The crisis is a product of our changing world realities. We are shifting as a developed nation from an economy whose basis of wealth was natural resources and manufacturing to an economy based on knowledge. The problem is that both students and universities must adapt to these new realities in a time of shrinking financial resources.

The crisis, according to Oliver, is not a consequence of financial decisions or even general economic conditions. It is “a product of our changing world realities” that requires that we “adapt”—the “incessant test of successful adaptation” (SED 71). And this is a postmodern crisis: the sky is falling at an ever faster rate (“a time of shrinking”), so do more and more with less and less to be better and better. In the new calculus of crisis, it is acceleration that counts, not distance travelled or “input/output ratio” (Readings 39; Lyotard 54).

In the “crisis of modernity,” history is threatened and with it the continuity with the past; it is a radical threat, one that annihilates and alienates.

In the “postmodernity of crisis,” history is no longer a factor as we move not along an historical trajectory of progress but scramble to grab hold of the coat tails of the future; it transmutes the fear of annihilation into a panicked struggle to redefine ourselves fast enough to profit from our timeliness. If we inhabited one logic of crisis or the other, we might have a firmer basis on which to make decisions—at the ballot box, at the institutions where we work, in the classroom. But, as the collapse of traditional literary periods in scholarship is making us well aware, cultural history is never neatly divided into epochs. We are in some senses still under the sway of the Enlightenment and its certainties about subjectivity, aesthetics, and community, as well as the modernist nostalgia for those certainties, and in other senses we are in the grip of the postmodern and its multimedia, unstructured onslaught of information and image. In the push-me-pullyou of the desire for responsiveness and predictability, to deflect the crisis of modernity while taking full advantage of the postmodernity of crisis, the political designations of “right” and “left” become increasingly difficult to apply. The “postmodernity of crisis” can draw on Lyotard’s 1979 assertion that “The idea of an interdisciplinary approach is specific to the age of delegitimation” (52) in order to support the timeliness and inherent leftism of a cultural-studies oriented curriculum, while the “crisis of modernity” can complete Lyotard’s sentence—“and its hurried empiricism” (52)—to decry such a curricular move as an effect of the capitalist drive for rapid production. But this is simply the yes/no alternative of a referendum which, as Baudrillard notes, “is only an ultimatum” (SED 62).

Cultural studies usefully challenges the Victorian-produced Linnaean divisions between materials of study that literary studies has always, in a sense, challenged. From the historiographical debts of traditional literary history and the philosophical debts of the Enlightenment subject (tacitly posited as author and reader until recent years), to the appropriation of psychoanalytic theory and continental philosophy in the 1980s, just to name a few influences, English departments have always looked beyond the purely literary. If this aspect of cultural studies looks new to us, it is only a matter of degree and not kind. Where cultural studies risks a more radical break with the past—rousing the “crisis of modernity”—is in that stream of cultural studies that focuses only on the present and the recent past, particularly when it is invoked institutionally as a means by which we can be more responsive to students’ interests and needs, imagined via the logic of crisis as extremely time-sensitive. But this variant of the push towards growth and change also motivates and sanctions larger classes, more part-time faculty (with the corollary of fewer full-time faculty), and

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different modes of evaluation to facilitate using fewer dollars to mark more students who are paying higher and higher tuition. It understands marketing as the selling of courses rather than high-quality faculty, because courses are the product and we are merely the machines that crank them out—“human capital,” in the new phrase.

Alternatively, the “crisis of modernity” might reinforce the value of the canon and the Enlightenment subject that it expresses, but it also anchors faculty tenure lines: a retiring medievalist must be replaced by a medievalist, or the department will, in this logic, become less than it was. In its desire for serious signification and the recapture of a past, the “crisis of modernity” allows the legitimation of faculty lines through the values of expertise and institutional stability rather than non-referential “excellence.” It thus not only provides arguments for staunching the hemorrhaging of full-time faculty positions but also for stemming the tide of the move towards the further exploitation of part-time faculty. Preserving the traditional canon and the category of the Enlightenment subject (in all its inherently classed, raced, and gendered stability), by helping to maintain tenure lines and so resist the shift to part-time labour, thus can serve the now-radical project of refusing to downsize, out-source, and contract out. Moreover, we find the traditional canon all around us in lucrative popular culture. While that canon is itself an unstable beast in its details, its larger contours are easily recognized. Hollywood regularly turns to texts by writers such as William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and E. M. Forster, bookstores use the cachet of “classics” to sell pre-1900 poetry and prose, and allusions to such “classics” are everywhere. *Blade Runner* includes a transformed but still-recognizable passage from William Blake’s *America*; *Star Trek II* relies heavily on slightly reworded passages from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, a novel discussed at length in a critical scene in *Star Trek: First Contact*; and there are scores of specific references to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* in the contemporary gothic (including a very canny episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). Popular culture offers one of the best arguments for the contemporary relevance of a traditional education in English literary history—and so the “postmodernity of crisis” can produce a rationale for a return to the past that the “crisis of modernity” craves.

Crisis, however, does not encourage ideologically coherent or even pragmatically cogent responses but instead solicits the unreflective adaptation of the subject. Marc Renaud, under the heading “Budgetary Crisis,” offers dire warnings in the SSHRC President’s Report on the March 2002 Council Meeting:

To set out the budget issue plainly: no matter how we look at it, SSHRC does not have the finances to meet essential needs.... Central to the Board's intensive examination of the options available was the need to act responsibly in discharging its mandate. The fundamental issue at stake was whether—by risking a significant budgetary over-commitment in future years—to keep the new tide of research energy, ingenuity and innovation rising or live within our immediate means and let it wither away.... Unless the government increases its investment in SSHRC by a considerable magnitude, we will have no choice but to cancel upcoming Standard Research Grants competitions.... The upshot of all the above is that every colleague must treat it as a personal responsibility to address the seriousness of the situation.

The crisis is clear: “SSHRC does not have the finances to meet essential needs.... [W]e will have no choice but to cancel upcoming Standard Research Grant competitions.” Then, in Baudrillard's terms, our “active response” is “solicit[ed]”: “every colleague must treat it as a personal responsibility to address the seriousness of the situation.” Various organizations and individuals responded by participating in a letter-writing and postcard-mailing campaign. By the President's Report on the June 2002 Council Meeting, Renaud is more hopeful: “there are signs that our message is being heard.... As the Government moves forward with its Innovation Agenda, I am confident that the work of Canadian social scientists and humanists will be recognized as a key element in making Canada a truly innovative society. Despite all, we look to the future with confidence.” This might appear to end the crisis, but it only reshapes it.

In the “Budgetary Crisis” of March 2002, Renaud invokes “the new tide of research energy, ingenuity, and innovation”; in the renewed confidence of June 2002, he characterizes our work only as part of a national innovativeness. “Innovation” is the federal government's term, but it is one that draws on a wider cultural lexicon to invoke simulation via the rising pressure to change. Instead of functioning on terms broadly comparable to a Repressive State Apparatus in exerting a direct disciplinary force (“the government will take away your research funding”), such wording functions in the more oblique terms of an Ideological State Apparatus, “hailing” us as human capital in the Information Economy that runs on innovation (“you are innovative”) (see Althusser 96–98, 118). To “improve innovation performance across all sectors of the economy,” as a federal government website puts it (“Towards”), is to increase the rate of “incessant spontaneous responses” (SED 71); to be “innovative” is to be capable of producing

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those responses at a threshold rate. If the discourse of “excellence” is part of a move away from the Enlightenment idea of the university as the means of producing enlightened subjects, as Readings persuasively argues, the rising role of “innovation” is its logical extension: both are empty categories, but “innovation” makes rate of change rather than achievement the currency of value. If “Excellence is ... the integrating principle that allows ‘diversity’ ... to be tolerated without threatening the unity of the system” (Readings 32), “innovation” allows that system and all of its constituent elements to be dynamic—to redefine themselves continually in a sort of perpetual simulation machine. Survival in the post-industrial age requires Proteus, not Odysseus.

In the Information Economy, faculty are tools of production where more and faster is always better and the expected rate of production increases steadily as working conditions decline. An entire generation of scholars was hired at a time when, just to be interviewed, one supposedly had to have a nearly tenurable record and PhD in hand, as teaching loads at Canadian universities began to increase through growing class sizes while professional allowances and conference funding fell in absolute as well as real dollars (not everywhere, of course, but this is about appearances and fears rather than empirical realities). Long gone are the days when pre-tenure years were represented as an apprenticeship period during which faculty could develop their teaching skills and begin to publish. More is better, covering two fields is better than being an expert in one, and in a competitive job market nothing is guaranteed so keep doing more, more, more—this panicked cry rung in our ears throughout the 1990s. We now have a generation of hyper-active researchers habitually caught between intellectual curiosity and the imperative to respond to the market conditions of the “postmodernity of crisis.” The “crisis of modernity” responds by characterizing their work as too research- rather than teaching-oriented, too non-canonical, too theoretical, too good for a small university to keep such high-grade “human capital,” and/or as failing to fit into the organic wholeness of the department by conforming to traditional period boundaries that define a particular academic position. The “postmodernity of crisis” has also changed teaching, promoting innovation in classroom instruction and course assignments as well as reading lists, so that PowerPoint, reading journals, and web postings are now part of a complex and ever-changing pedagogical terrain, while the “crisis of modernity” asks, “but what about the literary value of the text?”—as if innovation were so seductive that it would make us forget what drove many of us to become English professors, namely the seductiveness of the text.

A colleague in the sciences once told me that chairs in her field were rumoured to raise the tenure bar to keep pace with improving CV's so that, in the end, the granting of tenure remained under the chair's discretion. Whatever its accuracy, this rumour grasps the contemporary experience of the university as a place where the "postmodernity of crisis" maintains high rates of production and the "crisis of modernity" preserves institutional discipline (as codified in rank, tenure, and institutional position). Functioning sometimes like Scylla and Charybdis and sometimes like the positive and negative poles of a magnet in a generator, the two modes of crisis keep adrenaline levels high. As Baudrillard puts it in his discussion of the referendum, "The simulacrum of distance (or indeed of contradiction) between the two poles is nothing but a tactical hallucination" (SED 62).

If we fall in line with the "crisis of modernity," we have a basis for preserving tenure lines and student/professor ratios but we risk reinforcing traditional forms of power and privilege that, among other effects, consolidate institutional discipline. If we fall in line with the "postmodernity of crisis," we can gather new arguments for the value of literature and the fundamental interdisciplinarity of English studies but we provide theoretical and curricular shortcuts to the downsizing that is the holy grail of the current corporate ideology—the downsizing that sustains the panicked "publish or perish—but keep up your teaching numbers and sit on numerous committees" imperative that has driven faculty to accept, as the condition of job security, 50+-hour work-weeks so that we seem to talk more and more about how tired we are and less and less about what we are doing. If we consider our cultural moment as one that is shaped by both crises and grasp the simulation of academic crisis in general as a means of soliciting sacrifice and unconsidered response on terms that serve varied, even competing, agendas, then perhaps we can cobble together other strategies for dealing with the pressures applied to us on a daily basis. Framing cultural studies as a multi-period extension of literary studies, to take one example, would expand rather than shrink the English department's fiefdom while responding to contemporary trends. Or, to take another example, we could extend interdisciplinarity to challenge the late-eighteenth-century specification of "national literature" so that we could examine more thoroughly the richness of exchanges within literature in English across the boundaries of the modern nation-state; as theory showed us in the 1980s and 1990s, it is possible to form canons of authors by genre, methodology or concern and only secondarily, if at all,

by nationality.³ The polarizations promoted by the simulation of academic crisis would force us to decide between an imagined past and a projected future, while the present in which they overlap shifts beneath our feet.

3 Thus, for instance, “French feminism” is conceived as a branch of feminism rather than a subcategory of “French culture.” I have discussed elsewhere the emergence of “national literature” from, and in the service of, late-eighteenth-century nationalism (see Wright). Readings suggests that “the stakes of the University’s functioning are no longer essentially ideological, because they are no longer tied to the self-reproduction of the nation-state” (15), but the ABC of English departments in Canada—American, British, and Canadian literature—has arguably survived, in spite of a growing critical practice that challenges the heuristic force of a “national literature,” precisely because of the nation-state. As long as SSHRC and other government organizations, as well as libraries and book publishers, use national distinctions as the primary classification of literature and literary research, so that a project on eighteenth-century French literature falls first under “French literature” rather than “eighteenth-century literature,” the university will be “tied to the self-reproduction of the nation-state” through a shared acceptance of the priority of national borders to cultural identity.

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