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Recommended Citation
Godbout, Kevin (2015) ""Paying to be Proles”: The Academic Worker, University Nostalgia and Melancholic Refusal," The Word Hoard: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss3/5

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“Paying to be proles”: The Academic Worker, University Nostalgia and Melancholic Refusal by Kevin Godbout

La mélancolie est refus radical de la nostalgie pour la terre natale. [Melancholy is the radical refusal of nostalgia for one’s native land.]

Angela Cozea

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;

William Wordsworth “Intimations of Immortality”

My depression dreams of a life without anxiety.
My anxiety dreams of a life without depression.
This worries me. Then gets me down.

@NeinQuarterly

This response to Jaime Roman Brenes Reyes and Jamie Rooney’s afternoon interview with Laura Penny, “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Kanye,” has a few things to say about the sorry and sad state of the university in North America. The quotation in the title of my response is from her talk delivered later that same day, and was, in fact, a possible alternate title—Penny ultimately went with “Full Fees and Empty Pockets.” Sadness for modern universities, however, is never enough: the general public and the popular media ruthlessly attack this affective reaction to the defunding of post-secondary education as the complaints of whiny over-privileged students and young adults. That this spin of entitlement is (almost) completely false does not much matter. Besides, one is sad about the weather, spilt coffee and when the
cat marks the couch: what one feels about the current services-based, administrated to death, business-first university is not mere sadness. A critical engagement and reflection on this sadness is required—this unreflected sadness ought to be productively opposed to critique, to a critical project worthy of the training one purportedly receives from a public university. Through the “How I Learned to Stop Worrying” interview, but also “Full Fees and Empty Pockets” and Penny’s two monographs, the problems of the university appear in precise and stark relief. This university of a long-faded past is the dream and desire for a return to scholarship’s “purer” origins. Kant’s definition of the university represents such an origin, both actual and fantasized. I am going to work through two responses to the current issues that threaten the future—even the mere possibility—of the public university in the age of privatization. The first response works through a reflection on nostalgia and presents a pining for the “classical” university as I will refer to it. The second is a refusal of this nostalgia (for the classical university) through melancholic contemplation.

The idea of university which emerges from this melancholia transforms and redeems the Kantian classical university. This happens by separating the phenomenal events and objects of the university from the idea which inspires the university’s activities and discourses. Nostalgia and melancholy are complimentary through this radical opposition between them: the melancholic view of the university, rather than reflecting upon or recuperating an idealized past, refuses that past in favour of a possibility which did not come to pass as a prophecy, of a possible future, in the promise of every moment just about to arrive. The refusal of the present or past university as a homeland for intellectual thought and the scholarly class is not a dream of a recovered idealized university (which while desired does not exist and may in fact be more nightmarish than dreamlike), but rather the contemplation of an idea of the university in its materialist component pieces, which has not come to pass and is redeemed by its prophetic possibilities. Refusing to play the game(s) of the university exploitation machine—by whatever means available and necessary—may be the final imaginative act remaining, especially for the oppressed and exploited junior scholar and academic worker. This refusal, at first glance, may seem like a manifestation of nostalgia and a desire for a return to origins—by the end of this response to the Penny interview with Brenes Reyes and Rooney I will draw a line between two versions of an imagined past of the university and offer a possible future and the academic worker’s part in it. In this outline, I draw a distinction between an idealized university and the idea of a university: the former represents a utopian phantasm built up from the unmediated nostalgia for the classical university; whereas the latter, is a constellated ruin, a map into the past which may yet transform the future.
The classical university and academic work

The academic worker is the product of the university: a necessary and specifically trained producer of knowledge. Universities, as Immanuel Kant bluntly put it, create doctors. Kant’s *The Conflict of the Faculties* outlines as classic a definition for the vision of university and the creation of doctors, and his language ties the doctor to intellectual labour:

Whoever it was that first hit on the notion of a university and proposed that a public institution of this kind be established, it was not a bad idea to handle the entire content of learning (really, the thinkers devoted to it) like a factory, so to speak—by a division of labor, so that for every branch of the sciences there would be a public teacher or professor appointed as its trustee, and all of these together would form a kind of learned community called a university (or higher school). The university would have a certain autonomy (since only scholars can pass judgment on scholars as such), and accordingly it would be authorized to perform certain functions through its faculties (smaller societies, each comprising the university specialists in one main branch of learning): to admit to the university students seeking entrance from the lower schools and, having conducted examinations, by its own authority to grant degrees or confer the universally recognized status of “doctor” on free teachers (that is, teachers who are not members of the university)—in other words, to create doctors. (247)

To a large extent, the broadly understood purpose of the university remains this. Kant’s critical project, of course, establishes the labour of the university worker as the free expression of their intellectual powers, and cautions against the transformation of intellectual work into forms of serfdom or slavery. Kant’s definition or conception of the university, while classic, is one that must be continually re-examined, abandoned and renewed. Kant’s text, in the aftermath of Marxism and capitalism, cannot be held distinct from the exploitation of the factory worker, and the struggle of the worker to rescue themselves from that exploitation. But there is in Kant’s definition no question that he is outlining a university and outlining the basis of peer review: only a scholar can measure the worth of another scholar, that scholarship is primary to all other considerations at the university. The current university administrator makes an enemy of even the most basic principles of a university, in pitting services against learning, in saying that market principles—and not peer review—shall decide what scholarship is permitted, and in seeking revenue generation and expense reduction as absolute ends at the expense of all else.

But—to borrow Leszek Kolakowski’s question from his essay of the same title—“Why Do We Need Kant” in the context of the crisis facing universities? Without entering into a

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discussion of the entire Kantian critical project (and especially the second Critique), the answer for Kolakowski is that Kant’s thought and critical project is tied to the “survival of our culture” and necessary in “the struggle against slavery” (44). He writes that “even though the idea of human dignity, conferring the same equality on every human being, is older than Kant and actually of biblical origin, we owe Kant not only the attempt to establish it independently of revealed religion, but also the clear distinction of this idea from everything that may ever discovered in anthropological, historical, and psychological research” (54). Kolakowski contends, in the final sentences to his essay that “Humanity is moral concept. Unless we recognize that, we have no good reason to challenge the ideology of slavery” (54). In the intellectual project of critique, which the classical university privileges above all, the idea of human dignity, the morality of humanity and abolition of ideologies of slavery are primary—all of these are distinct from the revelations offered by religion. It is the absence of these three pillars of the classical (secular) university which makes the current state of affairs so saddening. Academic workers have their human dignity routinely stripped: universities are run by business-first administrators of questionable ethics and precarious workers are held down like serfs.

The sadness for the modern university I expressed earlier is perhaps better stated as a form of anxiety, lived and experienced by the members of a community. The exploited academic worker at their institution lives in a state of constant balled up anxiety. This anxiety is always two-fold: it combines the concerns of obtaining basic subsistence (food, shelter and wages) and social status within the university and the community at large (scholarship, academic freedom, the quality of teaching and the valuation of what one does professionally). This worker is always ready to participate in their own exploitation through self-reproaches: the worker is at fault for their weakness, and the system which exploits them is blameless by virtue of its status as system. The system is a narrative cycle of exploitation from all sides. It is always easy to attack the weak and vulnerable, and spin the narrative appropriately. This narrative can take on many shapes. One of this narrative’s most pernicious forms is the life of the graduate student or adjunct faculty member, as these academic workers must battle just to achieve the barest of subsistence within the academic context and through their labour. The horror stories echo in the nightmares brought on by debt, overwork and having to decide between the next meal or the next book, next month’s rent or conference or research travel. The self-appointed leaders of the university, not the students nor the faculty, but the business leaders, are quick to delegate responsibility and renounce the issues: an academic worker’s poverty is the result of their failure—failure to find funding, to generate publications, to partner with industry.

In Tony’s Kushner’s masterpiece play Angels in America, Roy Cohn, the closeted yet promiscuous, hyper-conservative, Reaganeite
lawyer, complains—as he answers a round of seemingly endless phone calls—that he is not an octopus (17). As he is about to expire from AIDS-related complications in part two, he exclaims to the spectre of Ethel Rosenberg: “Next time around: I don’t want to be a man. I wanna be an octopus. Remember that, OK?” (Kushner 247). The academic worker is both a victim of Reageanite neoliberal logic, but also very much in the position of Roy Cohn, bed-ridden, sick, and dying: the worker takes on more tasks than is possible in each hand, learning to live in perpetual isolation and darkness in a deep dark ocean—otherwise known as their basement office space. The academic worker lives in the depths, away from surface and sunlight, and subsists on small fish and plants. The academic worker is constantly trapped in a state of taking an endless series of mundane—even degrading—tasks, wishing they were more like an octopus-like creature and less like a human. This process of dehumanization engenders the sadness, feeling of depression and the accumulation of anxiety: one’s hopes for middle-class status and subsistence are instead a constant struggle for professional advancement in direct tension with securing the essential to continue living (on a diet of food stamps, salt, coffee, and beer).

The news, at least, is not all bad. Universities have a way of attracting all sorts of enthusiastic, highly-intelligent and articulate people. Sometimes they are able to take a breath from the rigours of academic work for a conversation around a few drinks. Last year, I had the joy to play a fly on the wall during Brenes Reyes and Rooney’s afternoon interview with Penny, and then I got to listen to Laura deliver a resplendent talk to some colleagues that night. I sat with those three during the interview in the Grad Club booth, over beers and spirits, and laughed (and sometimes got a word in) during the interview. The interview’s jovial, almost flip-pant, tone is informed not just by alcohol and good spirits, but by the remarkable ability of literary arts lovers to turn ressentiment into humour and good cheer. My response to Penny’s interview with Brenes Reyes and Rooney, in part, is rather simple: read it and treasure it, for Penny’s candour is rare and courageous. She is an academic who has not forgotten how to speak in the common tongue. A sure highlight to my mind is this question from Brenes Reyes and Rooney: “What do you think Western means by experience here?” and Penny’s answer:

This is something that has everything to do with the growth of administration, with the—I would say—cancerous growth of administration at every university. I do think that emphasis on experience is something that comes from administration, and it usually means buildings and services. It never means instruction; it never means we’re going to pay people lots of money to teach you. It never means how little they’re willing to pay to teach people even though this is what they always talk about on the website. They don’t talk about the fancy dorms on the website; they talk about “how

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committed our teachers are, [and] how much they love teaching you.” So, experience is just a code word for aspects of university life that are not scholastic. This is the kind of thing that administrators think of when they think of experience—basically the experience of everything peripheral to learning. (“How I Learned to Stop Worrying” 29)

The root of academic worker exploitation here at Western, and around North America, lies in this. Students are the recipients of a great privilege: to be here and to be further educated. The public image of the spoiled, party-first student is crucial to the exploitation of debt-addled, impoverished, yet highly-educated young people. This gets worse when one transitions from undergraduate to graduate studies. The enthusiasm and commitment of the academically successful student and junior scholar/teacher is the dual flogging of the academic worker: administrators make six-figure salaries to keep academic workers desperate and willing to accept below-subsistence wages without health benefits—and keep this information from the broader public and the press. Research is better paid because it generates more potential for capital—those who cannot do end up teaching—even though teaching and research go hand in hand and mutually benefit one another. With the continued partnerships with private industry, the value of independent research is also constantly at risk. Woe betide any university, and its business-school trained and weaned leaders/administrators, that pays either its teaching assistants, part-time faculty or adjuncts a living wage and treats them with dignity and respect. Underpaid and overworked, the academic workforce is left to uphold the ideal of the public university with little public support, and must often do so despite the acts of the administrative class who are delighted to slash and burn public institutions for a quick profit or a new source of revenue. The various groups of academic workers are far too busy fighting over disparate concepts and crumbs to mount an effective resistance, and a vicious cycle entrenches itself.

Nostalgic dreams

One certainly feels as if Kant’s definition of the university is describing a home for the public university and its communities. If the contemporary university has lost its classical definition, it seems to have therefore lost its ancestral home in the minds of its scholars and doctors. There is no easy fix for this malaise brought on by current circumstances. Svetlana Boym in The Future of Nostalgia writes that there are no wonder drugs for nostalgia. The academic worker pines for a university which may never have existed, and awaits a homecoming to an origin whose door was always already closed. Boym marks two “kinds of nostalgia” which “are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing” called reflective and restorative nostalgia (41). She explains that restorative nostalgia “puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” whereas reflective nostalgia “dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remem-
brance” (41). Boym adds: “Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (41). The great complaint of the nostalgic faculty member or student is the lament over the ruins of the university, while pining for the restoration and revival of a purer university, one which may indeed never have existed or was never sustainable. In this vision of the university, the worker is always front and centre, in this sense Penny honours the Kantian model of the university while trying to extract the labourer from their exploitative situation. This is the dominant theme of Penny’s other work and her recent talk at Western.

Brenes Reyes and I, after the afternoon interview, had the pleasure of welcoming Penny to give a talk here at Western. It is in this venue where Penny unpacked at much greater length the current, sorry state of the academic worker. The themes from the interview return, but in further detail and with Penny twisting the knife even further into the self-replicating autocracy of university administration. The narrative of austerity is always that the working classes have to tighten their belts for the greater good. I am sure graduate students relying on food banks are not feeling their belts tighten. Penny expresses the contradiction between promoting the commitment of impoverished teachers and the opulence of university president salaries perfectly:

Search though I might, I have never ever seen a university website that boasts, “Our president makes more than the Prime Minister or POTUS!” Even though several of them do, including yours [referring to Western University’s President]. I am not wholly compelled by the argument that these people are worth it, that we are forced to shell out this kind of money for managers because we must compete with private industry to get the best sociopaths. I find this argument especially unconvincing given how miserable the academic job market has been of late. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

Debt, low wages and the tenure lottery are a remarkably disciplining series of concepts and realities for academic workers. A temporary panacea is the allure of nostalgia for the declining ideals of the university and the fulfillment of a dream where graduate students and junior academics survive this current job market and maybe, just maybe, get out of crushing poverty and revive the classical university at the same time. The university community imagines a coming-together of minds funded by the public and invested in the public good. If the current university does not reflect this community, one awaits its restoration and nostalgically reflects on this state of affairs—and suffers for it.

The larger element of Penny’s critique of education is not limited to only this dialectic of nostalgia: her critique is not a critique of constant crisis (like mass media outlets). Education as a whole falls victim to this ethos of constant crisis. A doctor in anything has given up twenty years or more (elementary and secondary school to go with the three university
degrees) of their lives to education. For those twenty years, how many of them can be valued according to the pursuit of learning for its own sake, and not for that of a political, economic, corporate or parental master? How many of those years were actually spent *learning and critiquing* rather than simply confirming or copying from some pre-supposed notion or set of conclusions? And most importantly: how many times has an educational system that was *working just fine* found itself irremediably bungled by the irrationally overbearing edicts of an administrative class that has no conception of how to run, capture and *keep* the attention of a classroom? When was the last time university administrators had to give *lectures* to first year university students, to face the critique of a classroom setting? Penny describes this gap between administrators and teachers perfectly in *More Money than Brains*, in the context of secondary schools:

> [It is] very difficult to recruit, train, and retain good [school] teachers. Teaching has one of the highest attrition rates of any profession, with many leaving after five years. Some bitch about the mediocre pay, others complain about discipline problems in the classroom, but the most commonly cited reason for leaving the profession is intransigent and ineffectual administrators who undermine or overrule the teachers they are supposed to support. (90)

How much does the frustration of the school teacher resemble that of the university teacher? Teaching to the labour market, teaching to the economy, teaching to the lowest common denominator—where one asks: is the only room to advance into a living middle-class wage either winning the seniority lottery or defaulting to the administrator’s track of failing upwards?

For the academic workers here at Western and around Canada, who are somehow supposed to live up to the nostalgic ideals of the university while also suffering sub-poverty level living conditions—unless they win the major funding grant lottery—it all becomes a bit much. Penny, in her talk “Full Fees and Empty Pockets,” explains the factors at work in the current university exploitation system of junior university workers. The explanation is lengthy, and I feel the need to quote it in full, with breaks for commentary:

> The fact that this institution expects you to pay full fees for very little in the way of instruction or services is a microcosm of an exceedingly frustrating and ultimately unsustainable macrocosm. This is simply to say that a couple of trends that are affecting younger workers and students meet here, in the demand that you pony up full tuition, even when you are no longer pestering professors on a regular basis, even when you are not taking up valuable classroom space, even when you are not using the resources you are allegedly paying to use. Young work-
ers and scholars are increasingly subject to a sort of fiscal pincer attack, an economic predation that comes from at least two, and maybe even three, flanks. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

And to be exceedingly clear: the business-first university expects graduate students to pay their full fees and be happy they are fortunate enough to be exploited. One could be working in the “real world” at a “real job” with other non-student civilians. These middle-managers forget that universities are supported by the public with the purpose of being different from the rote business logic that permeates all aspects of contemporary social life. Worse, whenever the institution comes up short on its budgetary plans, the first source of revenue recuperation is more tuition fees, and the second is another ancillary fee for a made-up service, which justifies the hiring of yet another Vice-President of University Services. The creation of revenue streams for the business-first university is the end in itself and not a means to survive government under-funding. Penny continues:

First, students are being charged more for their education. Tuition fees have gone nowhere but up, and increased demand for post-grad degrees has certainly not reduced the costs associated with them, since the university as an institution excels at providing all the exploitation of regular capitalism, with few of its associated efficiencies. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

I have had the distinct displeasure of demanding from Western’s middle and top managers public statements in favour of increasing government funding for post-secondary education all year this year. The ask, especially when its made to the business-first university president, is always returned with a flustered blank stare, as if I had just revealed some atrocity or demanded the sacrifice of a favourite pet. Penny then outlines another flank of attack:

Second, students and adjuncts have been taking up a greater and greater share of the actual day to day work of the university. Given that the number of tenured faculty at Canadian universities is shrinking, even as enrolment continues to grow, and that most of the metrics we use for hiring and promotion are more research-centric, it’s not surprising that more of the teaching and grading burden falls on poorly paid adjuncts or on grad students who fork out cash for the privilege of doing the university’s scutwork, who are effectively paying to be proles. When I was a member of the grad students’ union and the relatively new local [PSAC Local 610], we tried making the argument that, since enrolment and thus, tuition fees were conditions of graduate student employment, any tuition fee increase should be matched with a raise. As I was not on the negotiating team, I did not actually get to hear the admin team laugh this off the table, but suffice it to say it was not part of our final contract. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)
In North America, somewhere between half and three-fourths of all university teaching is conducted by people who do not know if they will have stable employment from season to season, and the money they earn is nowhere close to ever being enough. To add insult to injury, university middle and top managers are paid massive salaries to remind precarious workers that they should *never, ever* expect more, or something fair, or something reasonable. Because of austerity, because the entitled worker already has too much, *because* reasons!

Penny then marks the interaction between the two first problems she has raised:

> These two factors—increased fees and diminished pay for work the institution’s functions depend on—are phenomena that affect many young people who are currently entering the work force. I thought being Gen X sucked, but things are arguably even more challenging for you Gen Y whippersnappers. You all have shown up at North America’s party at 4am, when all the good booze is gone, when there’s little left but a half-bottle of creme de menthe left to drink, but oodles of puke and property damage left for you to clean up. You have been royally demographically screwed, without the benefit of compliments, dinner or lube. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

When I was younger and in high school, I did not get invited to any of the good parties. It appears, however, that my entire generation was not invited to the most important party of all. This again marks the theme of not *just raw* exploitation, but that somehow this exploitation, this violence is supposed to be *pleasurable*, that I should somehow be thankful to hold up the crumbling edifice of the university as a place for academic freedom, scholarship and higher learning while it is torn apart and collapses. But there remains one final issue to consider:

> That brings us to the third problem, which is one that strikes me as being particularly acute in fields like academia, publishing and journalism. This would be the exploitation of the fact that you are foolish enough to love this. I’m sure many of you entered graduate study because you could not do otherwise, because you really care about your work, and with a much more gimlet-eyed view of your prospects than many of us back in the 90s might have had. (“Full Fees and Empty Pockets”)

Penny’s statement, “foolish enough to love this,” is perhaps the crescendo of this passage. I have yet to meet an academic worker who is here because they hate the university or their work, at least not initially. Hating the *conditions* of one’s labour is different than hating the labour itself. So many academic workers love the work that they do, they simply hate suffering for it. This is used by university administration middle-managers time and time again: do you not *love* being here? Are you not so fortunate to love what you do? Why complain then? And the guilt silences feelings of dissent.

*WH*, Issue 3, 8 January 2015
Brenes Reyes and Rooney, in the Penny interview, remark that the current generation must invent its future jobs. Gone or eroding are entry-level jobs, health benefits, daycare, regular working hours and wages, access to union protections: the world of stable work is vanishing or has already vanished. And on top of this the academic worker is supposed to pull themselves up by their boot straps, accept the “facts” and consume—without retching—an increasing pile of fabricated, pre-packaged bullshit. And they must like it, like it as much as if it tasted like all the delicious flavours of all the ice creams (even though the academic worker can no longer afford ice cream). At what point is enough, enough—I am reminded now of the closing words from William Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell”—and can one begin to refuse this pile of nonsense, to refuse this nostalgia for a university that is long gone and this notion of a messiah-that-shall-never-come, that the university is somehow just going to get better, someday, somehow? It is a fantasy to reflect on a university that may never have been; it is delusion to hope to restore a university which has long since fallen to the abyss of the past. One cannot eat nostalgia, beer and onion soup and expect to survive for long.

A melancholic refusal

What is remarkable about Laura Penny is how her engagement with the twin nostalgias outlined above always makes the university a series of problems, like a meditation without a sense of victimhood, where the system is critiqued without faulting the individuals trapped within that system, where the anxiety of the system has not annihilated those individuals. Penny has suffered from the current university system as much as anyone, but those experiences are transformed into the puns, jokes, aphorisms and reflections found in her work. Penny’s voice in her work is resolute, clear, productive and creative, even hopeful. It appears that something else, something different, is at work in her beyond nostalgia—something sustains Penny’s ability to engage in her critique, despite it all. As Penny reminds her readers at the outset of Your Call is Important to Us: “We live in an era of unprecedented bullshit production” (1).

Feeling like six pounds of shit in a five-pound bag is nothing new. There have been melancholias and manias on the medical books since the ancient Greeks. In a more churchy time, these symptoms might have been interpreted as demonic possession and treated with exorcism [. . . ]. In the early days of psychoanalysis, the same symptoms might have been evidence of a neurosis or a block, and the would have had to talk his or her way through it, in search of primordial trauma, perhaps under the influence of hypnosis or cocaine. […] It was not until the early 1990s that things began to change. In the post-Prozac world, a World Health Organization study on depression estimated that 121 million people suffered from the disorder, and
that only a quarter of them had access to treatment. Now I hate to make chicken-and-egg arguments, but which came first, the miracle cures or the global depression epidemic? My money’s on the cures. (*Your Call is Important* 154-55)

What then is the academic worker to do with their melancholia if nostalgia dreams are simply roadblocks to the idea( ls) of the university? What pill should the academic worker ingest to forget about the pain and dispel the anxieties? Does the academic worker have to succumb to another problem invented by the services-first university and subscribe to a product to “fix” it.

What to do with this pesky depressive ego-ideal and its anxieties? To draw from the conclusion of Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s *Au-delà de la mélancolie*, the ego must pluralize in the obsession with death and engage in a necessary encounter with melancholy to find a post-melancholy aesthetics where the ego is transformed into a mere ornament (149-50). What does this mean? The phenomenological subject described by Buci-Glucksmann (who actually is something like a flower-painting landscaper), which is obsessed with death and whose ego is a mere ornament, must live as if catastrophe approaches around every corner, as if every moment is a crisis, and therefore, no crisis is worth getting too worked up over. There are no easy analogies, syllogisms or syntheses to explicate this process and provide a guideline to easy success. The process only ends at one’s own death. If everything is valuable and everyone has value, one fights at every moment for the dignity and survival of life and the world, but this fight is engaged upon in a state of near-absolute calm, where all phenomena, depending on the perspective at work, are valued and are worth redeeming. The value of life is the cornerstone of art and philosophy, is the very question upon which liberal arts discourses are founded. As Penny outlines, part of the solution to the fiction of pre-fabricated realities is to be found in the training and critique made possible by the liberal arts. It is necessary to overcome the limits imposed by Kantian conceptual thinking to arrive at another vision of critique. As I pointed out earlier, the conditions which lead to the current state of extreme exploitation are also in the classical definition of the free university. Kant is a crucial point of departure, but one cannot stay there forever or even for very long. Something more is required, or else a nostalgia for Kant’s university is all one is left with.

As Penny’s visit to Western was planned over email and by phone, she and I had promised to chat about Walter Benjamin over beers after the Western talk, and while this never came to pass, Benjamin’s writing stages the opposition to the Kantian nostalgia I have outlined so far. For Benjamin, the word constellation represents a difficult overcoming of his roots in Kantian philosophy and German idealism. It tackles the relationship between “idea” and “concept” but also the mass of signification which comes with those words—and the inheritances from Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel.
It appears in the Trauerspiel book and forms the oppositions which sustain the thought of Benjamin throughout his oeuvre. This overcoming, or rather building a productive opposition out of Kant’s critical project, is grounded on a rigid differentiation and separation of idea and concept: it is based in radical opposition, the dialectic of clarity and opacity. This opposition enables and generates knowledge, as opposed to the accumulation of knowledge as a series of empirical syntheses. A reading of a now-classic passage from the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue,” from Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels (translated as Origin of the German Tragic Drama, often referred as the Trauerspiel book) helps to clarify the importance of opposition in Benjamin’s thought:

The set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality as such a configuration. For phenomena are not incorporated in ideas. They are not contained in them. Ideas are, rather, their objective, virtual arrangement, their objective interpretation. If ideas do not incorporate phenomena, and if they do not become functions of the law of phenomena, the “hypothesis,” then the question of how they are related to phenomena arises. The answer to this is: in the representation of phenomena. The idea thus belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which it apprehends. The question of whether it comprehends that which it apprehends, in the way in which the concept genus includes the species, cannot be regarded as a criterion of its existence. That is not the task of the idea. Its significance can be illustrated with an analogy. Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts or their laws. They do not contribute to the language of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria with which to judge the existence of ideas. (34)

It is not the role of concept to immanently reveal the world of ideas, or demonstrate its derivation from an idea. Benjamin stages the evolution of knowledge in opposition, where, to make an example of nostalgia, Boym’s restorative and reflective nostalgias are points in a constellation, which situate a version of nostalgia that is malleable yet consistent. One finds nostalgia by finding the constellation, but this finding is not a possessive grabbing of the concept. Constellations are not the stars themselves: ideas are not “their” concepts: ideas do not possess their concepts, nor the reverse. Ideas represent phenomena, as a constellation is a formation of stars, but of another world than the world of the stars. The opposition of idea and concept is a generative, productive relationship. But the relationship is open and non-possessive. The language which appeals to the concept is not the same language of the world of ideas. Benjamin writes:

Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements’ being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are

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subdivided and at the same time redeemed; so that those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes. The idea is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart. It is therefore erroneous to understand the most general references which language makes as concepts, instead of recognizing them as ideas. It is absurd to attempt to explain the general as an average. The general is the idea. The empirical, on the other hand, can be all the more profoundly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme. The concept has its roots in the extreme. (Benjamin 34-35)

Benjamin makes a series of associations: on the one hand the idea is general; on the other hand, the concept is the average, empirical, extreme. This framing of the idea separates it from empiricism and the collection of raw data: it is never sufficient to collect data and present this as the general idea. One’s conclusions about nostalgia and melancholia, for example, cannot be based in the sensory data of subjects and patients: it must emerge from nature itself, from language itself. These conclusions are not judgments or assessments, they represent a finding of what keeps the world together and its experience meaningful and relevant. The idea is central, it redeems and represents. Benjamin takes this even further:

Ideas—or, to use Goethe’s term, ideals—are the Faustian “Mothers.” They remain obscure so long as phenomena do not declare their faith to them and gather round them. It is the function of concepts to group phenomena together, and the division which is brought about within them thanks to the distinguishing power of the intellect is all the more significant in that it brings about two things at a single stroke: the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas. (35)

As I was once asked by a colleague: “Is there an Idee capable of salvaging the phenomena of the university—is this not why one always return to Kant’s Conflict of the Faculties?” In this question, one finds Kolakowski’s point on the value of Kant as a crucial point of departure for culture. The last sentence from the Benjamin quotation is a classic example of the tension between Benjamin’s materialism and messianism. Ideas are generative and concepts possessive—concepts group phenomena and ideas represent them—the salvation of phenomena is in their idealization. The salvation of phenomena is in the dignity which ideas and their constellations afford them in that process of redemption. Moreover, it is in the peer review process, in the relationship and collaboration between colleagues, that the phenomena of scholarship and research are redeemed and saved, despite the systematic privatization of universities. It is becoming incredibly difficult to find a place in the university to share research which is not exploited by

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that same university: the creation of alternative solutions or spaces, such as *The Word Hoard*, is more necessary than ever. Kantianism and prophecy may exist in an oppositional relationship, but it is ultimately a productive one.

Blake once wrote in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that “Without Contraries [there] is no Progression” (34). My response has outlined a few such progressions through opposition. Here is another: Călin Mihăilescu takes two words for concept, one from Spanish and the other from German, preserves the full philosophical and literary history of the words, and sets up an opposition between them, just as outlined with nostalgia previously. For Benjamin, *Begriff* is a form of concept that carries the philosophical inheritances of Kant and German Idealism in general. In his essay, Mihăilescu contrasts *Begriff* to *concepto*—the latter draws from Mihăilescu’s reflections on Balthazar Gracián. In this context, *concepto* takes on the qualities Benjamin ascribes to *Idee* in the *Trauerspiel* book. Mihăilescu writes that the “etymological difference between *concepto* and *Begriff* may suggest their systematic opposition” (7). About the *concepto* he writes that it “points back to the two meanings of the Latin *concipio*: ‘to gather as a totality,’ and ‘to become pregnant/to give birth’” (7). Mihăilescu continues, writing: “On the other hand, the *Begriff* rather than being a ‘gathering,’ is a clutching, a grasping (as performed, naturally, by griffons)” and adding that:

The “birth-giving power” of the *concepto* is replaced here by that of “harvesting,” with the ironic result that the instrumentalization of reason gradually diminishes the generative powers of reason. As the *Begriff* gathers the world through the oblivion of its beauty, it comes to define life as possession. (7)

The notion of concept as a clutching, a possession of knowledge, forms a vital opposition to the *Idee* or *concepto* as the possibility for generation and birth/rebirth. In this way, the idea of the university is not a reaching into hell, like Orpheus reaches for Eurydice, for the desired object, but the creation of a new phenomenon. This inaugurates a dialectic to which one is not accustomed, where instead of a negation leading to a synthesis, one locates a negation that suspends complimentary terms and allows for their interaction. Like melancholy and nostalgia. Like *Idee* and *Begriff*.

*Futures*

I began this response with promise for a future: this futurity is located in a sustained contemplation of the past, a past which did not come to be, about which one is melancholy. The modern university, in its obsession with directing research outputs, market reciprocity and learning outcomes, has completely occluded the value of digression as a method of learning. How often have the greatest insights of thought emerged from pure digression: wanderings in a library at

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night, a frustrated experiment at the laboratory or a walk in the woods? The long, slow walk is so often a refusal to produce, but it is a grand opportunity for free-form creation and visionary thinking. But these visions are so often lost in the midnight strolls that shape thought, and yet those visions are formative and constructive, as Frédéric Gros has argued in *Marcher, une philosophie*. Crushing poverty does not leave space for thought: that space must be allocated to survival, the necessities of bare life. Penny’s critique of modern life is tied to a critique of economic rhetoric and language. The language of the economist is the only form of discourse that carries weight in this current age. To an extent, the critique of the modern age must be conducted in that language. At the same time, another language is needed, one which provides space for non-numerical value, one that is rooted in general, meaningful ideas and not solely concepts drawn from market economics. In this language, oppositional thinking conducts leisurely and digressive ideas, born from deep consideration and lengthy debate. In this language, words are not counted but they are felt, like caress or a wound. In this language, the university emerges as a place where the labour of the academic worker represents an experience where the map is not the territory. To be clear, there is no space in this battle for survival, for the possibility of a future university, to fight with one’s natural allies. The scholars of the university must direct their energies not to petty arguments over this or that concept, but towards an idea of the university which embraces the totality of its prophetic possibility. No one is coming to save the university: that’s up to the academic worker and their allies—and the feared disaster(s) lurk around every corner, and the time for action was always already yesterday, the eternal distant prophetic past.

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Works Cited


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