Confronting Change

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For many of us working in the colleges and universities of Canada, there is a profound sense of new political, economic, and professional conditions challenging core assumptions in post-secondary education—two current examples: the implications of radically increased participation rates for the university of both a real and imagined past, and a related debate on the roles played by differing types of colleges and universities. As noted in the December 2006 "Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion," changing demands and expectations "have taken their toll on individual scholars—and on the academy's infrastructure as a whole—and strained the profession in ways that are intensely serious but not yet well understood or articulated" (26). In what follows, I want to argue that individual and departmental engagement in understanding the complexity of those broad institutional contexts is crucial to the development of effective responses to disciplinary questions as directly focused as "Why Do I Have to Write Like That?"

None of us will have any difficulty citing reasons for our inability or reluctance to engage more fully in understanding and addressing the relation of immediate departmental and disciplinary issues to the institutions that support our work: too many students, too much perceived pressure to

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publish, the triumph of administrative managerialism, and, for many of the most privileged and potentially powerful members of our community, tenured faculty, self-representations as more solitary than social, hedgehogs not foxes, thereby protecting the blind spots of self-interest that allow us not to connect the balance of teaching, research, and service in our own professional careers to the sometimes ethically challenged expansions of doctoral programs and the increased reliance of our departments on contractually limited instructors.

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Given that many of the issues we are confronting have been around for almost forty years, why must we now reject Atwoodian victim roles rooted in denial, demonization, and abdication of responsibility? I suggest that one only has to look at government intervention in our discipline and departments in Australia to see the threat to our disciplinary and institutional survival—and if you don't know what I mean, my first point regarding the need for information and collective discussion as a spur to engagement is already made. From its inception, our discipline never had an easy-to-grasp unitary focus and hence justification. In its current hydra-headedness, it is, at best, not well understood, and, at worst, dismissed. If we don't assume a responsibility for explaining, justifying, and asserting the importance of what we do in relation to the institutional discourses surrounding us—in terms of engagement defined by us—our fate is perhaps deservedly sealed.

The 2006 experiences of both President Lawrence Summers at Harvard and of Vice-Chancellor John Hood at Oxford suggest that faculty can engage with potent impact on their institutional structures, but even the status of "Professional Concerns" at our own conference reflects a revealing imbalance between the sessions complementing our disciplinary identities (more than fifty) and the two focused on professional and institutional discourses and responsibilities. If I am right that our long-term goal has to be to acknowledge that *we* can re-think and re-balance not just the writing requirements in our courses but the triad of teaching, research, and service in terms appropriate to the stewardship of our discipline, then there are some obvious, even embarrassingly banal, first steps that we can take in fostering a stronger bridge between our disciplinary and institutional identities. Examples include taking departmental subscriptions to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (that subscription then providing online access to the *Chronicle*'s "Daily Report" for all faculty) and splitting the participation of distinguished scholars in our visiting speakers series equally with university press editors, SSHRC or CFHSS officers, faculty from the nearest School of Education, or the most recent Canadian ex-President

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of the MLA speaking not about adaptations but about the idea of "collegiality" that she made a focus of her presidency. My personal hobby horse in this category is to change department meetings with Deans, Provosts, or Presidents from either quasi-regal visitations or opportunities for rabid departmental screeds on the decline of the university to occasions when senior administrators can be both educated and called to account by departments who have done their academic and financial homework and can thus effectively advance their own priorities.

Such informed debate could be enhanced if work-in-progress departmental seminars solely devoted to disciplinary research projects could be split with sessions focused on the MLA report I mentioned earlier, the Federation's paper on "Renewing Scholarly Associations," or on discussion of new conference formats to address the persistent variants of "I gave a paper at MLA last year but the only people present were the other presenters and myself." With the "TransCanada" and "Recalling Early Canada" projects, Smaro Kamboureli, Roy Miki, and Daniel Coleman have found models for accessing SSHRC and university funding without becoming hostage to the sometimes sparsely attended twenty-minute paper session; the 2008 Congress theme, "Thinking Beyond Borders," might encourage similar structural re-thinking by the CFHSS and ACCUTE.

For PHD-granting departments, perhaps the most useful focus for such a session would be the Carnegie Foundation's major study, *Envisioning the Future of Doctoral Education,* released late in 2006. That volume also allows me to segue to a more direct focus on one aspect of the topic of this session. As Michael Bérubé has observed, it is a lot easier "to shuffle the canon" than it is "to shuffle the professoriate" (30), and so in looking to encourage change I think we need to focus on changing the terms of professional engagement for the next generation of graduate students. Obvious initiatives could include introducing a larger component of institutional issues into our "professional skills" courses and the creation of a common required graduate course on the history of both our discipline and the university as institutions and of the discipline and the university in Canada. But I want to suggest that the crucial starting point in re-thinking writing expectations in our discipline is a re-thinking of the doctoral dissertation. It is the dissertation that is at the centre of the complex network of interrelated changes in our universities, SSHRC, and our university presses, and thus it is at the core of the current tensions we are experiencing in our disciplinary and institutional identities.

Cognate disciplines are finding new models for the dissertation's demonstration of a capacity for the exploration and assessment of past

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scholarship and for original and independent thought in an exercise of sustained inquiry. Although there are exciting positive exceptions, our own discipline remains largely wedded to a model of the dissertation often tagged "a larval monograph" at best or "an article on steroids" at worst. The tyranny of the dissertation as larval monograph remains the key source of "the tyranny of the monograph" (the phrase is Lindsay Waters's, currently Executive Editor for the Humanities of Harvard University Press). In complex mutations, that tyranny emerges in the appointment, tenure, and promotion decisions determining not only our own careers but also our decisions on the careers of others, and it drives the current valuation of teaching, research, and service.

Calls for re-examining and de-mystifying the dissertation date from William James's "The Ph.D. Octopus" through David Damrosch's *We Scholars* to the December 2006 MLA report. But we continue to ignore the relation of the doctoral dissertation to the much talked of and multiple crises in the humanities and do not even discuss the variations proposed by Damrosch and others. American university presses report a drop from 1250 to 275 in humanities monograph sales in the last thirty years (Waters, *Enemies* 36), but our dominant response to the ongoing "transformation" of SSHRC remains rooted in a model of the solitary scholar requiring release time from teaching in order to produce a monograph. Simultaneously, our universities face increasing pressure from vocal critics of the humanities to explain attrition rates of up to 50 per cent in doctoral programs and a time to degree beyond the B.A. of nine years of registered enrolment (Golde 5, 352). Skilled in a language of critique but less effective in mobilizing a rhetoric of justification, we will serve neither the institutions paying our salaries nor our disciplinary successors well if we continue to retreat into either denial or simplistic binaries that we would disdain in any other context.

Perhaps, then, a necessary complement to the question, "Why Do I Have to Write Like That?" is Alice Munro's "Who Do You Think You Are?". As we experience stress in the disciplinary and institutional identities that constitute part of our academic performing selves, Munro's Ralph Gillespie offers a sobering reminder of the need to address generational change. From boyhood, Ralph builds a reputation on his imitations of Hanratty's town characters, including the auspiciously named Milton Homer. But as Flo relates to Rose, Ralph's inability to read change produces his demise:

> "[H]e carries on just the same [says Flo], imitating, and half the time he's imitating somebody that the newer people that's

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come to town, they don't know even who the person was, they just think it's Ralph being idiotic."

[Rose:] "Like Milton Homer?"

"That's right. How do they know it's supposed to be Milton Homer and what Milton Homer was like? They don't know. Ralph don't know when to stop. He Milton Homer'd himself right out of a job." (202)

"Ralph don't know when to stop. He Milton Homer'd himself right out of a job."

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