

I can understand her annoyance when she thought she had found a “Chicagoan” and a “Platonist” who was denying the relevance of final causes: purpose, free choice, agency. Perhaps if I had used some such phrase as “*reductive* determinism” or “*single-cause* determinism” or “*mechanistic* determinism” we could have met on different ground.

She and I may well disagree still on the quite different question of the ultimate predictability of everything. A lot of people, both subtle theologians like Jonathan Edwards and some of the “scientific” reductionists I’ve labeled, believe that the future is utterly determined by the present: God foreknows all, or—if there is no God—some imaginary god, knowing the total condition of the present, including the non-chaotic realities of chaos, could predict all (Midgley is good on this question, too). I can think of no decisive arguments for such a claim, but the dispute seems to me obviously one of the “essentially contested” kind that will never be resolved. Just as “reductionist determinists” can never finally win, neither can “total predictabilists”—or their opponents. Do I thus join the predictabilists, because I “know” what finality will be?

In any case, I regret that my over-simplified opening gambit has deflected Grenander and me from the main point: what can we now do to provide young scholars and teachers with circumstances that nourish rather than poison their careers?

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A Dissent on the Academic Life

To the Editor:

No one has ever thought to ask me what I thought about my academic career. However, since Germaine Brée and Wayne Booth, two distinguished scholars, chose to reflect on their halcyon years in academe (“Two Scholars Reflect on Their Careers,” 109 [1994]: 935–50), I have decided to offer a mirror reversal of their tales of joys and challenges. At every turn, my academic life is the antithesis of Brée’s and Booth’s, and I envision no change. By recounting what happened, I hope to disabuse those who still believe that earnest efforts make any difference. Such efforts simply do not count in the hallowed halls of academe. Brée suggests that one of the rewards of academic life is participation “in a community answerable to itself for its decisions and actions”

(939); she shows me how far I have traveled beyond the pale, for I believe that scholarly degrees do not absolve one from wider social and ethical responsibility or free one for “some kind of dramatic confirmation” of “ego” (Booth 947). Both Brée and Booth speak from a world of expected privilege. Needless to say, that world is not mine.

I began my graduate career at a university where research reigns supreme, one of Booth’s track-2 institutions (949). Each of my four academic degrees involved a different field, as I did not find myself until I reached graduate school. Actually, this is not quite accurate: I am still finding myself, unfolding as an autodidact. No one at the prestigious institution wanted to teach me—or learn from me. What my teachers wanted was my support of their research. As a graduate student, I became the surrogate of a chair. I mistakenly accepted this role as advanced education. It was advanced, all right—advanced exploitation.

When in 1978 I could no longer conduct someone else’s research, write someone else’s dissertation, live someone else’s life, I found that I would be going it alone, but I had no idea of how alone. I had violated a secret code of established scholars. Little did I realize that to assert one’s rights was a no-no in academe. I still believed I could earn a niche in that world.

I had begun writing scholarly essays before I completed my dissertation. In one instance, my first chair took major credit for my work, but I quickly learned to work (and write) alone. And to my surprise and delight I was successful with my efforts. One of my teachers lamented that I lacked creativity, but I managed to write—and to have published—a great deal, as evidence of my merit. I completed my dissertation in December 1980, or, rather, I was barely allowed to furnish a flawed document and then expelled from the university with a PhD. No one cared what would happen then, for I had dutifully served everyone’s ends. No one—not even my eternally happy-go-lucky chair—paved the way for me, and I did not come from an upper-class background, but I reasoned that my efforts would count for something somewhere. I did not have a clue that in academe success means being taken under the wing of an established scholarly bird and unflaggingly doing its bidding. There is simply no room for the odd duckling on its own.

After four years of research, I secured a temporary teaching assignment. I was fortunate; my PhD university had done little to prepare me for teaching. My new academic home, the University of Wisconsin—coincidentally, Brée’s longtime institution—elected to take on

the curious combination of proven scholar and novice teacher that I was. An academic department had to rely on me, and I still rejoice that I did not fail my colleagues. To this day, I cherish the friends, associates, and students I knew in Madison. My heart broke when I had to leave. I had briefly peeked inside the tower, and then the door slammed shut.

My experiences in Madison taught me much: I was hardworking, eager, even creative. I had the required flair with words. And I loved teaching. Surely, I hoped, someone would acknowledge my merit. Someone did at Harvard (in an NEH summer seminar in 1987), and again I thrived in a fine scholarly milieu. I finally belonged, I thought. If only I could continue writing, I would earn my niche in academe. I could surely convince others, and they would offer me a role. I never told them how much I needed that role.

I kept pulling out all the stops, adding to my vita and bibliography, soliciting references from my associates at Wisconsin and Harvard, until sometime in 1991–92. At that time, the chair of a department at another major university sought me out, urging me to apply for a position there. I was reluctant, having participated in some sham searches at the institution. (Most searches are facades: department chairs and members preselect the new associate, and only then is the announcement placed and the “search” held.) I tried to plead for a bona fide, open search, and the chair readily guaranteed an even playing field. Once again, I sent an impressive dossier. I later learned that the new faculty member was already on the scene, the procedure pro forma. How many other searches that I had participated in were predetermined? All of them? Is this what Brée means by “real bonds of solidarity” (939)? Is academe always beyond reproach, even when it destroys lives?

Since my latest adventure with academe, I have had more articles, essays, and reviews published. Having no regular access to a library, I have yet to attempt a monograph. I have proved my merit to myself, but, increasingly, I wander my own way. My ideals, values, aspirations simply diverge from the academic norm: I try to treat everyone kindly, while academic folks dwell on their egos—and admit it. I have managed to learn and still to stay the same. The experience has meant financial, social, and physical hardship and a great deal of loneliness. But academe will know my name, that I gave my all, that I did my best, that I was an acknowledged teacher and scholar, if only for one shining moment.

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The Cervantine Tercentenary

To the Editor:

In his curious and enjoyable article, “The Bonds of Patrimony: Cervantes and the New World,” (109 [1994]: 969–81), James D. Fernández notes incidentally that José Enrique Rodó’s essay “El centenario de Cervantes” was “[w]ritten in 1915, on the occasion of the three-hundredth anniversary of Cervantes’s death” (969). He would more accurately have said “in anticipation of the three-hundredth anniversary of Cervantes’s death,” for the author of *Don Quixote* died in 1616, the same year that Shakespeare went to his grave. Indeed, it was supposed that they died on the same day, 23 April; and in some verses preserved in an earlier edition (11th, 1938) of Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*, the American poet and Hispanist Thomas Walsh (1875–1928) expresses this notion under the title “April Twenty-Third”:

Death sallied forth upon this fateful day
Through Spain and England for a mighty prey,
And struck two masters with a single blow
And laid Cervantes and Will Shakespeare low! (840)

Scholars, of course, have known that the date may have been the same although the day was not, for Spain was using the New Style calendar while England was still on the Old Style. Furthermore, it has now been determined that Cervantes likely died before midnight on 22 April rather than on 23 April, when the burial certificate was issued.

Thus, Walsh’s rhetoric belongs to fiction and falls into the same category as the words of an earlier poet, John Keats. In “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” Keats despoils Vasco Núñez de Balboa of the glory of discovering the Pacific Ocean, giving that honor to “stout Cortez,” who, as far as we know, never set foot on either side of the isthmus of Panama:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent upon a peak in Darien.

Still, 1616, and not 1615, is the undisputed year of Cervantes’s death, and Fernández may wonder that the “eagle eyes” of a *PMLA* editor did not catch the error. Perhaps he may console himself with the words of a tolerant Spaniard who once told me—in my despondence