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ON THE SUPPRESSION OF THOUGHT BY OUR ACADEMICS: A PRESENTATION

WILFRED CUDE

I. INTRODUCTION

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his controversial Harvard address of 1978, told the academics of the West some uncomfortable truths about their cherished illusions. Prominent among those truths was the charge, seriously made and hotly disputed, that Western scholars could be party to the suppression of ideas they deemed unacceptable. Although the mechanisms were subtle and difficult to identify, unlike the brutal forms of repression practiced in the East, the effect was lamentably the same.

Without any censorship in the West, fashionable trends of thought and ideas are fastidiously separated from those that are not fashionable, and the latter, without ever being forbidden, have little chance of finding their way into periodicals or books or being heard in colleges. Your scholars are free in the legal sense, but they are hemmed in by the idols of the prevailing fad. There is no open violence, as in the East; however, a selection dictated by fashion and the need to accommodate mass standards frequently prevents the most independent-minded persons from contributing to public life and gives rise to dangerous herd instincts that block successful development.

Solzhenitsyn spoke in generalities, and was answered with the sort of confusion such generalities usually occasion. Some reflection, granted; a lot of indignation, certainly; and, inevitably, soothing silence. Oblivion. After all, who could really cite an instance of this sort of thing occurring in the West, particularly in the academic circles so dedicated to the free and impartial circulation of ideas? This article can. Here is an instance of exactly what Solzhenitsyn was talking about. It is all a little depressing, a little ugly, and --

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once you ponder the implications thoroughly — more than a little frightening.

A year after Solzhenitsyn's address, I wrote an article I knew no academic in North America would welcome at any time. I wanted to say in print what dozens of graduate students and university instructors have said to me privately, that the North American doctoral program — the culmination of advanced study in our universities, and the primary source of our scientists, teachers, critics and professional writers, of our entire intellectual class — was just not functioning properly and simply had to be revised. In support of that thesis, I advanced dropout statistics occurring consistently in clearly-defined patterns in several major studies in the United States and Canada over the past three decades, taking the patterns themselves as evidence of grave and sustained malfunction caused by the unchecked subjectivity of university instructors. Then and now, in Canada, with the universities under extreme financial pressure, this was an argument that was not going to win an open airing. Whatever the pretext, it would not be heard. The reason, I submit, is obvious. Dr. von Zur-Muehlen, in the article I cite on the Canadian doctorate, noted that the doctoral candidate is the source of major revenues for the universities. "By 1975-76, Ontario universities were receiving about \$12,000 a year from the provincial government for each Ph.D. student, in addition to tuition fees." (p. 61) The 9 November, 1981 edition of *Maclean's* further noted that faculty salaries, "which average 46.8 per cent of operating expenditures" in our universities, "might seem a prime target for cuts" (p. 62) in an era of austerity. My article thus poses both an indirect and a direct menace to any academic reading it. If it gets any credence among students, it might well deter possessors of the master's degree from entering programs that offer better than even chances of repaying years of study with nothing but frustration: and that would restrict university revenues, and indirectly affect faculty pay. Moreover, if it gets any credence among the general public, it might well generate pressures on the faculty to promote genuine reform; and that, of course, would directly affect not only faculty pay, but also the entire overburdened tenure system. The argument was doomed to be ignored, therefore, no matter what salutary effect it might have on the state of letters and the conduct of research in Canada — as in the United States, where our branch-plant doctorate originated.

The article was submitted to one American and three Canadian journals over the period of a year and was rejected by each one. Yet I believe that the rejection slips themselves shadow forth the possibility that antipathy to this article is not due to either a trivial argument or an insufficient analysis. The only point on which the rejection slips concur is that the article must be rejected; when they come to specific reasons for that rejection, they vary widely; and,

more significantly, some advance observations which contradict those offered by others. On the central question of whether or not the paper is well-written, for instance, the readers are totally irreconcilable. The editors of Journals Two and Three, who both resorted to the rather extraordinary expedient of placing the article before more than the usual number of readers, are agreed that the subject is of considerable interest and the paper is competently worked; but the editors of Journals One and Four, who subjected the article to a more cursory examination, are agreed that the treatment is hopelessly inadequate. Indeed, the editor of Journal Four found the article so outrageous he denied me the courtesy of a second reading, something that never before happened to any submission of mine across a decade of academic publishing. Even on the face of it, then, there is something suspect about this reception. Either the paper is hopelessly ill-written, or it is not: the total lack of accord on a feature so fundamental is enough to cast doubt on the judgment of at least some of the people responding so negatively here. When that doubt is placed in conjunction with the very real economic motives also counseling rejection, motives that no academic would dare mention, let alone discuss, the nasty issue of the suppression of thought must certainly come to the fore.

Because this would seem to be the case, Bob Sorfleet and *Journal of Canadian Fiction* provided me with a forum for my views. I hasten to add that this does not mean they endorse my views, but they did feel those views warrant an open hearing. In the light of the widespread sensitivity among academics to issues that touch upon their financial interests, this is an act of courage noteworthy in the history of scholarly publication in this country. That said, there is only one other acknowledgment to be made before the reader proceeds to the article, the rejection slips and thence to the rebuttal. Although the article remained essentially the same for all four journals, I did incorporate one modification between Journals One and Two, and another modification between Journals Two and Three. The first modification was to prune the illustrative analogy between the universities and the automobile industry; but I allowed the analogy to stand, and I remind the reader that there is a difference between an illustrative analogy and the argument over an analogy, a distinction the readers of Journals One and Three overlooked. The second modification was to add two paragraphs, one on the Warhaft report and the other on one major English department's doctoral dissertation results, which fleshed out in specifics some of the preceding points. The total was a change of a few hundred words in an article encompassing several thousand, a shift in presentation rather than substance as the article moved from journal to journal.

II. THE CANADIAN BRANCH-PLANT DOCTORATE: IS IT FUNCTIONING AS IT SHOULD BE?

In his 1968 study entitled *The Ph.D. in English and American Literature*, a study initiated by the Advisory Committee of the Modern Language Association, Professor Donald Cameron Allen paused briefly to ponder the dropout as a possible symptom of malfunction in the North American doctoral program.

Our knowledge about dropouts is very vague. The educationalists have made studies of the problem, but no one has any exact figures for English Departments for any exact period of time. Abou ben Dropout's name does not head the roll call of graduate departments; in fact, his name drops out of the files almost as soon as he does. We should like to know more about these departed ones; their voices — critical, frustrated, sour, desperate, and discouraged — would make an excellent antiphonal chorus to the chanting of those who have succeeded (though even some of them can sing off-key with full throats). Unfortunately, our dropouts are the blank faces in the procession; and even if we knew them by name and place, it is not very likely that many of them would answer a questionnaire.¹

Professor Allen's observations certainly deserve far more consideration than they have hitherto received. The dropout is important, if for no other reason than that our formal analysis of the North American doctorate is rather sadly one-sided. Insofar as the program has been investigated systematically, it has been investigated by people holding the degree, by people usually employed at the very universities granting the degree, by people who (no matter how disinterested they thought themselves) had an obvious vested interest in perceiving the degree as a perfectly viable scholarly institution. We have not heard from Abou ben Dropout, the surly and disenchanted possessor of the ubiquitous A.B.D., merely

because it has not yet served anyone's professional purpose to tell his story plainly and openly. Hence, though the humanists and social scientists in particular will bitterly resent the comparison, the current academic record of exploring and rectifying the problems indicated by the doctoral dropout is in the unenviable position of being scarcely better than the automobile industry's record of exploring and rectifying safety problems over the decades prior to the publication of Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at any Speed*. And, worse still, unless the humanists and social scientists in particular devote themselves immediately to a full and impartial treatment of this vulnerable area of their profession, the North American groves of academe run as great a risk as did Detroit and Oshawa in being confounded by the appearance of such a book.

We might recognize at the beginning that our academic community has, consciously or unconsciously, imitated the attitude of pre-Nader Detroit and Oshawa towards embarrassing statistics. Instructors of all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have long known, as Professor Allen admitted on behalf of himself and his colleagues teaching literature, that "not too many" of the "aspiring students in their seminars" would "someday" finish "with gold tassels on their mortarboards."² But the overwhelming majority of instructors of all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences was content to live in a relatively complacent way with the knowledge, resisting any impulse to determine with precision the damage done to their students by ill-designed and awkwardly-functioning doctoral programs. Professor Allen, let it be said very much to his credit, did not resist that impulse: instead, he set about in a forthright manner to assess the casualties as accurately as possible, applying to seventy-seven English departments in American universities granting the doctorate for estimates of the attrition rate among candidates for the senior degree. The results, while not absolutely reassuring, were also not any serious cause for dismay. Only five departments polled actually confessed to having an attrition rate of over fifty percent. A further twenty admitted to having an attrition rate of between twenty-five and fifty percent; but the largest single block of departments, thirty-one in total, claimed an attrition rate of from ten to twenty-five percent — while another twenty boasted an attrition rate of under ten percent, and one highly imaginative department went so far as to insist it hadn't any attrition rate at all.³ These figures had a lulling effect, if not upon Professor Allen, then upon the academic community as a whole. They served to cancel out current criticism of the program, despite the fact that such criticism was often sincerely offered and sometimes widely acknowledged: for they established, did they not, that the casualty was still atypical? The estimates of a sample of English departments thus gained credibility in the profession, and nobody pressed very hard for more specific information.

It is again very much to Professor Allen's credit, therefore, that he was not totally satisfied with the statistics at his disposal. Although he accepted them more or less by default, he also quoted a consensus among American graduate deans that the doctorate "had never been defined" and "the course toward it was 'tortuously slow and riddled with needless uncertainties',"¹⁴ and he went on to refer his readers to a gradually accumulating body of publications, many of them written by educationalists, limning out the awkward possibility that attaining the doctorate was a far more equivocal process than the universities led the candidates to expect. Prominent among the publications Professor Allen cited was one focusing itself upon the issue of the dropout: *Factors Related to Attrition Among Doctoral Students*, by a group of educationalists working under the direction of Dr. Allan Tucker of Michigan State University. Based on a "sample of 23,864 post-master students whose names were submitted by the graduate deans of ... 24 participating universities,"¹⁵ the Tucker study included successful graduates from the doctoral program as well as doctoral dropouts, comparing and contrasting the two groups in order to assess the extent of the attrition problem. One fundamental result of the Tucker study should have raised doubts about the accuracy of the Allen estimates: the overall attrition rate in the humanities was fifty percent, which was higher than the social sciences attrition of forty-one percent, and which was moreover considerably higher than the attrition in both the physical and biological sciences — thirty and twenty-nine percent, respectively.¹⁶ Either the attrition rates in the departments of English and American literature were remarkably lower than those prevailing in the other departments teaching the humanities, or those estimates furnished to Professor Allen by his responding departments were far more optimistic than the actual circumstances warranted. Because the Tucker statistics were not broken down by specific discipline, it was impossible to use them either to verify or to refute the Allen estimates; and the profession at large was content to leave the issue unresolved, despite Professor Allen's ample discussion of a situation that should have received prompt attention.

This disinclination among humanists and social scientists to pursue the implications of even the available attrition rates is all the more disturbing in the light of several other findings in the Tucker study. Not only do the dropouts leave at vastly different rates according to their broad areas of study, but the successful candidates also progress at vastly different speeds according to the same broad areas of study. "As usual, it takes longest in the humanities," Dr. Tucker wrote: "6.0 years." It took "next longest in the social sciences, 5.1 years," and it took "the least amount of time in the biological and physical sciences, 4.1 years."¹⁷ Nor was that all. In terms of the finished product, the dissertation that constitutes the

culmination of the doctoral student's efforts in original research, Dr. Tucker noted the successful candidates were again streamed according to the same broad areas of study. The average length of a dissertation is 105 pages in the physical sciences, 108 pages in the biological sciences, 226 pages in the social sciences and 285 pages in the humanities.¹⁸ The ensuing pattern was both unmistakable and thought-provoking. As the statistics moved from the physical and biological sciences through the social sciences and thence to the humanities, the doctoral program manifested itself as an increasingly disconcerting proposition. More students dropped out; the program took much longer; and the final project had to be much more involved, at least in terms of sheer verbiage. Perhaps because he was mindful of the hullabaloo C.P. Snow unleashed upon himself with the celebrated "Two Cultures" lecture, Dr. Tucker treated this pattern with more circumspection than directness. "It has also been suggested that the 'nature of the discipline' and the characteristics of the individuals in it also influence the amount of attrition and the time it takes to earn the degree,"¹⁹ he commented delicately; but this was not an argument he chose to develop at any length, and his failure to present his statistics according to specific discipline relieved him of any obligation to do so. Yet this pattern now places that argument squarely before those who teach the humanities and the social sciences, since it has recurred even more emphatically in another very detailed study of the North American doctorate.

Reporting on the results of a survey of all Canadian universities granting the doctorate, a program which virtually all Canadian universities have implemented in branch-plant fashion using American facilities, techniques, texts and instructors,²⁰ Dr. Max von Zur-Muehlen of Statistics Canada provided definite confirmation of the pattern sketched out by Dr. Tucker. Noting that "the formal requirement from Master's or equivalent standing to a Ph.D." is "two to three years," Dr. von Zur-Muehlen observed that "the normal time is five years" in "the humanities and social sciences," whereas it is only "three years" in "most sciences." And noting that his figures require "thoughtful analysis," Dr. von Zur-Muehlen went on to estimate that the attrition rate is "fifty percent" in the humanities and social sciences, whereas it is "less than twenty-five percent"²¹ in the sciences. "The humanities and social sciences represent only thirty-three percent of Ph.D. output," he elaborated, "although [they also represent] close to sixty percent of doctoral enrolment."²² But it is through the impact of the actual statistics, broken down by discipline, that the force of the difference between broad areas of study is actually conveyed. According to data provided to Statistics Canada by the Canadian Association of Graduate Schools, the hapless candidate venturing into doctoral programs in the humanities and social sciences now faces odds that would daunt anyone but a kamikaze pilot. Over the academic years

from 1969-70 to 1975-76, the total enrolment¹³ in English was 5,630, and the number of degrees actually granted in that time was 409, an astonishingly low ratio of attainment to enrolment of 7.3 percent. This abysmal performance was sustained throughout the major disciplines in the humanities and social sciences over the same period. An enrolment of 2,327 in the Modern Languages and Literatures yielded 159 degrees, an attainment ratio of 6.8 percent; an enrolment of 4,503 in History yielded 350 degrees, an attainment ratio of 7.8 percent; and an enrolment of 2,570 in Sociology yielded 141 degrees, an attainment ratio of 5.5 percent. These results contrasted vividly with those in the physical and biological sciences, also over the same period. An enrolment of 4,797 in Physics produced 958 degrees, an attainment ratio of 20.0 percent; an enrolment of 5,015 in Medicine produced 1,051 degrees, an attainment ratio of 21.0 percent; and an enrolment of 6,111 in Chemistry produced 1,425 degrees, an attainment ratio of 23.3 percent.¹⁴ However these statistics are construed, their pattern renders one conclusion inescapable: in humanities and social sciences, Abou ben Dropout's tribe has increased with a vengeance. Tragically, the casualty in those disciplines is no longer atypical; on the contrary, in Canada at least, we can say with some precision that he has virtually become the norm.

Given that this is indeed the case, the reaction of the academic commentator to the situation should be nothing short of fascinating, to both the humanist and the social scientist alike. Just as Detroit's response to excessive highway casualties was to blame the driver rather than the car,¹⁵ so the standard response from the groves of academe to excessive doctoral casualties is to blame the student rather than the program. The motive, in both instances, is frighteningly the same: not even years of training in the supposedly objective weighing of evidence could prevent academics from behaving like automotive executives and engineers, when the vested interest being challenged was their own. Dr. Tucker took great pains to develop an elaborate hypothesis that the patterns he had discerned could be attributed strictly to insufficiencies in student talent or motivation. "We also conclude from the data" he maintained, "that most of the dropouts went as far in their doctoral program as was consistent with their levels of ability, their commitments to specific areas of specialization or their motivation to complete the requirements of the Ph.D."¹⁶ This is an hypothesis that the English professors polled by Professor Allen endorsed in a resounding manner.

"Dropouts lack," says one professor, "a holy drive." "They are confused," say others, "have conflicting goals," "are too often failed poets," or rather "find more creative work far more charming." They "set too high standards for themselves," and the consequent "sense of inadequacy" overturns and defeats them.¹⁷

But the weakness in this line of reasoning is that it simply cannot explain the strange disparities in doctoral attainment ratios so clearly delineated by Dr. von Zur-Muehlen. The fundamental requirement for admission into a doctoral program is the master's degree or its equivalent, usually obtained with an average of "B" or better; and this requirement remains consistent, no matter what the discipline. Why is it that students meeting this requirement in the humanities and social sciences nonetheless leave their doctoral programs at a far greater rate than their counterparts in the physical and biological sciences? And why is it that students successfully completing the doctoral program in the humanities and social sciences nonetheless take far longer to do so than their counterparts in the physical and biological sciences? To these questions, Dr. Tucker's complex musings on motivation provide no satisfactory answers: furthermore, as Ralph Nader pointed out in connection with those ugly statistics from America's highways, as long as the perpetrators are to free to place responsibility on the victims, no satisfactory answers will be forthcoming.

As a statistician, Dr. von Zur-Muehlen could not disregard the hypothesis that some institutional factors could be more influential than student quality in producing the anomalies he found so difficult to explain. Though he did grant "more careful selection of students might lessen the dropout rate," he also felt obliged to list a series of factors solely under the jurisdiction of the university as possible influences on both the rates of attrition and the longevity of programs. "Differences in Ph.D. productivity have been attributed," he hazarded cautiously, "to the less formal structure of the humanities and social sciences, greater emphasis on the dissertation, and the newness of many doctoral programs."¹⁸ Since he had gone that far, it is a little surprising that Dr. von Zur-Muehlen did not even refer in passing to another piece of evidence exposing the entire hypothesis of student quality as a red herring. In an earlier unpublished pamphlet examining graduate degree attainment by level, Dr. von Zur-Muehlen showed that the wide spread of attainment ratios at the doctoral level just does not occur at the master's level. Over the period from 1968 to 1975 in Canada, the ratio of attainment to enrolment at the junior level of graduate studies was 36.7 percent in the humanities, 39.9 percent in the social sciences, and 37.2 percent in the physical sciences.¹⁹ If we are to accept the hypothesis that the wide spread in attainment ratios at the doctoral level is due to some inability or reluctance on the part of departments in the humanities and social sciences to recognize and eliminate either poorly-prepared or badly-motivated candidates, then we must ask why the same inability or reluctance does not manifest itself in those departments at the master's level. To this

question, there is again no satisfactory answer; and that alone should make us look once more at Dr. Tucker's findings, in search of further evidence that might be at odds with the hypothesis he had made such efforts to sustain.

We might return to Dr. Tucker's study by noting his hypothesis rests upon a somewhat forced distinction between ability and motivation. "Grade point average obtained for undergraduate work appears to be a fairly good predictor of the ability of a doctoral student to obtain satisfactory grades for graduate course work," he conceded, but he went on to insist "it is not as good a predictor as to whether a student will successfully complete the research requirements of a Ph.D. program." The reason behind this paradox, he explained, is "that personality factors are just as important as ability in the successful completion of a doctoral degree." Those personality factors are, of course, to be sought exclusively in the student. "Successful students are those who have confidence in their ability to succeed and surmount hurdles and who have the desire to compete and grow in an academic atmosphere, and are motivated to adjust quickly to new demands placed on them." Plausible as all this may sound, it still does absolutely nothing to explain why so many more students with a master's or equivalent in the humanities and social sciences should fail to demonstrate the requisite moral fibre than their counterparts in the physical and biological sciences. More difficult still, all this does absolutely nothing to explain why Dr. Tucker should assume a master's degree is evidence of scholarly ability when he does not assume the same degree to be evidence of scholarly motivation. "Since all the respondents in our study had successfully completed a master's degree program or its equivalent," he observed, "we assume that all of them, including the dropouts, had the ability to complete the course requirements of a Ph.D. program."²⁰ Any doctoral candidate should have completed at least a year at graduate school in a master's program, and many of them should have written a thesis as well: is this not a fairly substantial demonstration, therefore, of a positive motivation towards research? Dr. Tucker did not even consider this line of argument, because to do so would be to look elsewhere than at the student for the "personality factors" that varied doctoral attrition rates and lengthened doctoral programs; it would be to look carefully at the way his colleagues in the humanities and social sciences conducted their supervision of original research — and this he was understandably quite loathe to do.

We should proceed no further without remarking, at this juncture, that Dr. Tucker was not quite accurate in his summation of his own statistics. Grade point average at the undergraduate level is a viable predictor of successful completion of the doctoral program — in the physical and biological sciences. Dr. Tucker first ranked the universities in his study in three strata according to

quality, with stratum 1 at the top and stratum 3 at the bottom; he next ranked the students in his study in three groups according to grade point average attained in undergraduate work, with those of an average of 3.6 or higher at the top and those of an average of 2.9 or less at the bottom, computing their marks on a grade scale of A=4, B=3, C=2; and he then correlated these figures with his figures on attrition at the doctoral level. In the biological sciences, the results were precisely what we would have expected: at every stratum of graduate school, the rate of attrition decreased as the quality of student increased. And in the physical sciences, the results were almost what we should have expected: at both the stratum 1 and stratum 3 graduate schools, the rate of attrition decreased as the quality of student increased; at the stratum 2 graduate schools, though, the rate of attrition was higher with the median quality students than with the lower quality students. This departure, however, was not as significant as those in the humanities and social sciences; and it was with those departures that Dr. Tucker's difficulties multiplied. In both broad areas of study, at the stratum 1 graduate schools, the results were again precisely what we would have expected: the rate of attrition decreased as the quality of student increased. But in both broad areas of study, at the stratum 2 graduate schools, the results were confused: in the humanities, the rate of attrition decreased only slightly between the lower quality and median quality students; and in the social sciences, the rate of attrition was higher with the median quality students than with the lower quality students. Moreover, in both broad areas of study, at the stratum 3 graduate schools, the results were almost the reverse of what we would have expected: for the rate of attrition was higher with the higher quality students than with the lower quality students.²¹ Committed as he was to the hypothesis that student quality alone determined doctoral attrition, Dr. Tucker had no alternative save to adopt the strangely contradictory stance that the undergraduate grade point average was an unreliable predictor of student quality. And yet the necessity for adopting this stance quickly vanishes, we should realize, once we entertain the hypothesis that institutional factors actually determine doctoral attrition. Obviously, undergraduate grade point averages will be useful as predictors of progress at the doctoral level — unless either the quality of the graduate school, or the nature of the discipline, or a combination of the two together, intervenes to distort the results.

That such institutional factors do intervene to increase doctoral attrition rates, we can scarcely doubt after considering two more of Dr. Tucker's findings. In the first place, he satisfied himself that most doctoral candidates could function at least adequately in their studies, as long as those studies were confined to the relatively clearly-defined area of course work; but he was forced to conclude that the dropouts were eliminated on a much larger scale when they

had to cope with either comprehensive examinations or original research, both areas of study in which the subjective influence of the instructor becomes paramount. "Only a few of the dropouts reported that one of the main reasons for their attrition was unsatisfactory grades," he commented: "a considerably larger number indicated that the research requirement was one of the main reasons for their attrition."²² In the second place, moreover, he satisfied himself that the toll taken among doctoral candidates was significantly higher at the lowest quality of graduate school: but he was forced to acknowledge that there, where the toll was greatest, the quality of the student — as assessed by the quality of the university where the student did pre-doctoral training — was of the least consequence.

In general, the attrition rate was found to be consistently higher among doctoral students in stratum 3 type universities than among doctoral students in universities in the other two strata. Among doctoral students in stratum 3 type universities, however, the attrition rate is just as high for those who received the bachelor's and master's degree from stratum 1 type universities as for those who received the bachelor's or master's degree from stratum 3 type universities.²³

The sequence of inference here should be pretty plain. It is in the more uncertain area of original research that the doctoral casualties begin. It is at the lowest quality of graduate schools where the casualties are highest. And there, where the casualties are the highest, the quality of the student's pre-doctoral training — as assessed by the quality of the university where he completed that training — makes little difference. When we add to all that the additional fact we have already gleaned, that the quality of the student — as assessed by undergraduate grade point average — fails to be predictive of success at the lowest quality of graduate school, then the case presenting the institutional factor as a major cause of doctoral attrition seems complete.

We cannot grasp the full import of the case against the North American graduate schools, however, until we understand the unique involvement of those teaching the humanities and social sciences. The attrition of graduate students varies significantly according to the discipline at the doctoral level alone, a development that should lead to reservations about how original research is conducted and supervised in those disciplines with higher attrition rates. For as the discipline moves from the more objective to the more subjective, from the physical and biological sciences through the social sciences and thence to the humanities, original research obviously becomes more cumbersome. The reason is not hard to find: as the discipline moves from the more objective to the more subjective, the need to qualify any argument increases, in order to render that argument proof against objections which might come from an expanding number of unrelated directions. Student

research, under these conditions, is bound to become more cautious and more conservative — and more convoluted. More students drop out; the program takes longer; the final piece of work is more highly qualified; and, perhaps most telling of all, at the lower quality graduate schools, the better candidates eventually start to leave at a greater rate than the poorer ones. None of this, we should have the courage to confess, is a reflection of the intellectual difficulty inherent in pursuing the respective disciplines; on the contrary, all of this is a reflection of the inhibiting effects a progressively increasing infusion of subjectivity must have on original research. And the subjectivity most culpable here, it is absolutely necessary to stress, is that of the instructor — not that of the student. As facts become more awkward to isolate and as arguments become more prone to elusiveness, the more vulnerable to attack from a careless, ill-disposed or just plain stupid professor the student becomes: and this remains true, no matter how intelligent the student or how viable the research project. Worse yet, the more inadequate the graduate school, the more pronounced the consequences of this situation will be. It is high time humanists and social scientists perceived how badly bogged down in subjectivity their conduct of research has become; and it is also high time they took upon themselves the responsibility of doing something about the damage their subjectivity has caused and is causing, not only to doctoral students, but also to the unhampered quest for knowledge in their disciplines.

None of this should really come as much of a surprise to those familiar with Professor Allen's study. In quoting with approval the impression of "one thoughtful respondent" concerning graduate research, impressions which he had the candor to endorse as delineating "a state of things" that most humanists "recognize only too acutely," Professor Allen presented the major pitfalls awaiting the hopeful student approaching a doctoral dissertation.

In the first place, the problem often lies in the limitations of acceptable dissertation subjects and approaches, so that a student who could do a splendid job on some subject for which there is no precedent, or through some approach where the scholarly demands are great but not obvious, will be turned down and will end up grinding out one more edition of one more tenth-rate play. Secondly, the dissertation writer is often disheartened by the non-research problems he encounters; drafts which are not returned for months; dissertation advisors who disappear on leaves or accept positions at other schools; demands for drastic revisions in chapters which had earlier been praised; and assorted rivalries and politics which infect so many graduate committees.²⁴

Professor Allen's "thoughtful respondent," a recent recipient of the doctorate in English literature, had offered a charge-sheet against those in the discipline supervising graduate research that should

have shocked the profession into action. According to this assessment, graduate professors "often" prefer safe but mediocre dissertation projects to more venturesome but possibly more contentious ones, and they consequently force their doctoral students to comply with their wishes. Those who will not comply, of course, are free to drop out. Also according to this assessment, graduate professors "often" expose their doctoral students to incredible displays of insensitivity, ranging freely from the rude to the brutal: pointless delays of months or years, mindless reversals of prior analyses, and irrelevant threats to the peaceful progress of the project. Those who will not tolerate this sort of abuse, of course, are free to drop out. The only result such flagrant irresponsibility can have is to drive from the discipline precisely those students that should be retained: and this result, as we have seen, has already occurred in the lowest quality graduate schools. In the humanities and the social sciences, we cannot afford to tolerate any longer those academic attitudes slowly debasing the doctoral dissertation into a diplomatic obstacle course devised solely to determine the candidate's willingness to absorb punishment.

To those reluctant to acknowledge the inhibiting effect of personalities on research, possibly one last detail from the Tucker study might prove convincing. Although by far the greater number of students responding to the Tucker survey claimed to be at ease with faculty members, those who could not make that claim were much more likely to find themselves in difficulties.

The attrition rate is the highest for the group that reported that they did not know any faculty members well enough to visit them without an appointment. Over all, attrition is 59 percent for this group compared to 26 percent for the group that indicated that they knew more than 75 percent of the faculty on an informal basis. *This pattern obtains in each area of study and in each stratum.*²⁵ [Italics mine]

The cynical graduate student's unwritten first maxim, "know your prof," thus receives statistical confirmation. But it is a maxim that must occasion a certain amount of unease, especially in the more subjective areas of study, since the primary objective of the North American doctorate should be scholarship — not sycophancy. And it remains to be seen just how long the North American approach to the humanities and social sciences can support any claim to scholarship at all, given the forces at work in both broad areas of study that are promoting conformity and mediocrity.

The debilitating effect of professorial subjectivity on the conduct of student research can be estimated from certain remarks made by Professor Sidney Warhaft in his *Report on Graduate Studies in English in Canada*, commissioned by the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English for submission to the Canada Council in 1975. The doctoral dissertation in English,

Professor Warhaft concluded from his survey of responding departments, has consistently been defined as "an original contribution to knowledge or scholarship based on research into primary sources," notwithstanding the clear intent of this definition, however, Professor Warhaft felt impelled to add in a revealing qualification that the work "original" referred "more to a new or fresh synthesis or critique" than "to the discovery of new facts or the invention of a system." Nor was that all. In considering the "nature and scope" of the dissertation, Professor Warhaft had to concede "certainly it does not put much more emphasis these days on methodology as such — at least not as a topic for investigation...."²⁶ The astonishing thing about these remarks is that, despite their importance as an indication of where research in the discipline is going, they occasioned little or no debate among academics. And yet, what has Professor Warhaft really told us? First, that the word "original" has been broadened in the pursuit of literary studies to include a reworking of the procedures and findings of others. Second, that the word "original" has at the same time been restricted in the pursuit of literary studies to reduce an emphasis upon "the discovery of new facts or the invention of a system." And third, that this modification of the word "original" has been in process long enough to affect the formal investigation of methodology — surely the most pressing concern of a vital and dynamic discipline — in such a way that the topic no longer figures prominently among the initial research projects of the new practitioners. The import of these three points, in cold, hard and unequivocal terms, is that safety rather than originality has become the basic objective of the doctoral candidate in English. Go over the ground of somebody else's work again, rather than venture out on your own into regions like methodology where you can get into trouble: that has become the approach with which the doctoral degree in English is now sought. But what, we must sooner or later ask, will become of a discipline whose youngest practitioners have in fact begun to eschew originality?

The answer to that question is to be found in the dissertation section of the university libraries, and it is not an answer to give much cheer. Take, for instance, the dissertations accepted by the English department at one of the nation's largest universities.²⁷ Between 1965 and 1979, seventy-five Ph.D. degrees in English were granted. But not one of these accepted dissertations offers methodology as its primary focus of investigation. Instead, fifty-two of the dissertations concern specific authors of established literary and historical reputation: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Blake, Melville, Conrad, Joyce, Pound ... all figures thoroughly examined elsewhere. Moreover, thirteen of these dissertations concern general topics of little originality: "Old and Middle English Lyric", "Editors of Shakespeare", "The Poet as Hero in Romantic Literature", "Modern Irish Drama", ... again, all topics thoroughly examined

elsewhere. And, most depressing of all, the remainder of these dissertations concern Canadian literature, a field recent enough to almost demand vitality and innovation: however, each Canlit dissertation approaches its subject by way of history, sociology or genre, a tactic which ensures that the analysis can evolve without ever touching upon the thorny methodological issue of whether or not the material under discussion is worth reading in the first place. The unrelieved impression is one of a large group of junior investigators proceeding in an ultra-conservative manner, an impression driven home by one final statistic. Of the seventy-five successful candidates, twenty-three had previously taken their M.A. at this same university; and, of this group — a number amounting to almost a third of the whole — fourteen had simply expanded their master's thesis into their doctoral dissertations.²⁸ It would appear the successful candidates for the doctorate are learning only too well that the contentious, the debatable, the unexplored areas are to be avoided at all cost — including the cost to themselves of curbing for years the instinct to venture into the unknown, which is the sole task of those genuinely dedicated to original research. If these results are typical of the results attained in most disciplines in the humanities and social sciences in Canada (and the Warhaft report and the von Zur-Muehlen statistics would suggest that they are), then the average graduate with a doctorate in those disciplines seems perilously akin to the pathetic figure so contemptuously dismissed by James Watson of DNA fame: "a stifled academic who had never risked a thought."²⁹ Unless we are prepared to move decisively and quickly towards salutary change, the new gods of our temples in the groves of academe will soon be the three monkeys that see, hear and speak no evil.

The first item of urgency is to ensure that universities keep far more accurate records on the status of every student at every level. In an era of electronic data-processing, such a modest objective should be immediately attainable: and only by attaining that objective will it be possible to determine, with real precision, the full extent of the dropout problem. So that attrition rates may be accurately fixed, we should be able to isolate from any program in any area of study over any significant period the following distinct groups of students: those currently enrolled, those successfully graduated, those transferred to another program, those temporarily withdrawn, those failed, and those permanently withdrawn. And so that rates of progress may be accurately fixed, we should be able to differentiate among students currently enrolled according to year of study: those in their first year of the program, those in their second year, and so on. There is no aspect of this modest objective that could not be carried out in a statistical fashion, one that would maintain the full rights of privacy for the individual student. And there is no aspect of this modest objective that should cause the universities

undue alarm, since the administrative mechanisms for accomplishing what should be done are already in place. We must banish to the past a casual era when a serious academic could say of any student in any category what Professor Allen said of Abou ben Dropout: "his name drops out of the files almost as soon as he does."

The second item of urgency is the immediate implementation of the major reforms to the doctoral program proposed by Professor Allen. Professional groups, such as the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English, should make it their business to appraise existing and proposed doctoral programs, and they should use their influence to ensure that insufficient programs are either improved or abandoned: for to do otherwise is nothing less than to acquiesce in academic fraud.³⁰ "The doctorate in English is often harder to earn in a weak department than in a strong one," Professor Allen concluded: and he lashed out forcefully at programs so inadequate that they literally fail those candidates unfortunate enough to become entrapped in them.

The department that begins to grant the doctorate must want to give the degree as a service to American education, and not for the sake of competitive vanity, or for the securing of what so many respondents to the questionnaires call "slave labour." ... The first requirement is trained and active personnel. In some current departments too much of the graduate teaching is done by people who have not had the experience of earning a doctorate, by people too fresh from their own doctorates, and by professors who have never sullied their amateur standing by writing other essays or books once their own dissertation was micro-filmed and shelved. Those people hardly know what the scholarly or critical process is and their lack of reputation inspires their students with little confidence. Their own lack of confidence is often evidenced in the inordinate demands they make of the students....³¹

Any such general movement towards reform, Professor Allen went on to amplify, should be accompanied by a number of specific changes³² — all of them long overdue decades ago. Standards of admission should evidence some modest degree of conformity throughout universities in North America. Language requirements should be rendered both more realistic and more relevant: the impractical (and largely cosmetic) demand for two foreign languages ought to be replaced by an insistence upon one language competently mastered. Course offerings should be harmonized, and greater use should be made of the seminar. The comprehensive examinations should be made more uniform, and they should most emphatically be made more objective.³³ Viable alternatives to the traditional dissertation, including one or more articles published in reputable journals or an original piece of creative work, should be examined and accepted. And the final oral defense of the dissertation should be eliminated,

on the grounds it is an expensive and time-consuming redundancy. Each of these proposals has now been before the profession for well over a decade. Isn't it time we really made some definite efforts to do something other than form more committees to dither the problems away?

The third and final item of urgency is a reform not considered by Professor Allen, yet a reform that decades of unchecked subjectivity in the humanities and social sciences have nevertheless made essential to the preservation of even a modicum of originality in the doctoral research done in those areas of study. As matters now stand, every doctoral candidate writing a dissertation knows the merits of the work will be assessed by a committee, rather than by the profession at large: the requirement of "an original contribution" can therefore be totally neglected by all concerned, and the candidate concentrates exclusively upon satisfying the personal whims of a tiny group, whims that may or may not have some bearing on the advancement of knowledge in the field. The necessary risks involved in moving beyond a rehash of what is already known quickly strike the average candidate as too formidable, with the lamentable outcome noted by David Holden, a publisher confessing a marked distaste for the dominant trend in scholarly writing.

"Dissertationese," the standard lingo of doctoral dissertations, is the language that professors use to disguise self-contempt with pomposity. The scholar, who often spends his professional life counting the cats in Zanzibar, secretly knows that what he has to say is unimportant. So he inflates his diction, convolutes his sentences, and builds a complex scholarly structure (with lots of footnotes) to make the content sound important.³⁴

Until the candidate can feel confident that his work might win a wider hearing than that afforded by a committee, his incentive to depart from the contemptible approach described by Mr. Holden will be nil. One means of securing such a wider hearing would be to devise a viable method of appeal from the committee to the profession at large. This could be done, as is the case in some Canadian universities, by allowing any doctoral candidate the option of submitting his dissertation directly to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for final assessment. The Dean of Graduate Studies, in such an instance, would place the dissertation in the hands of three established experts in the field from outside the university: and they would in turn grade the work on a pass/fail basis, with the majority vote being the one accepted. It would have to be a very confident doctoral candidate, one quite sure of the importance of his research, who would venture such a route to the degree. But at present, without any such alternative, a candidate at odds with his committee has no choice save to abandon his arguments or his degree. And Hobson's choice, we must in the end admit, is not the

most profound route to sound scholarship.

Should such an activist program strike us as unrealistic, we might come to reflect upon the ultimate lesson the automobile industry has to offer. That which activist criticism and government pressure could not bring about, consumer resistance quickly accomplished: Detroit and Oshawa continued to produce inefficient and shoddy vehicles until the general public, stung by rising gasoline prices and infuriated by sloppy workmanship, flatly refused to buy such stuff any more. The result is very dramatic recent history, fully chronicled in a recent *Time* cover article; record losses in the industry, massive backlogs of unsold and unwanted machines, unparalleled layoffs of workers at all levels, costly and extensive redesigning and rebuilding of factories — in short, near-chaos brought about largely by the stubborn refusal of responsible officials, engineers and workers to acknowledge problems that threatened a crisis for years.³⁵ In an era witnessing universities competing for student enrolment, the North American academic community seems hell-bent on devising another branch-plant disaster. Rather than address the manifest inadequacies of what we are doing, we continue to pretend that nothing is amiss, that all is well. But the Tucker and von Zur-Muehlen studies have rendered that pretence transparent, at least to the students who provide the primary reason for a university's being. What person with a master's or equivalent will now commence a doctoral program in either the humanities or the social sciences, when the odds against successful completion are generally over fifty percent? The answer to that question should be obvious, and it is an answer that bids fair to empty our classrooms of the serious doctoral candidates essential to carry on our professions. If we fail to take the necessary corrective measures publicly and soon, many of us may well find ourselves unemployed as we watch our disciplines dwindle away. That result would then be, as it was in the case of those displaced by the disruptions in the automobile industry, no more than simple economic justice.

NOTES

¹Donald Cameron Allen, *The Ph.D. in English and American Literature* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1968), p. 51.

²Allen, p. 51.

³Allen, table 4.24, p. 169.

⁴Allen, p. 27.

⁵Allan Tucker, Ph.D., *Factors Related to Attrition Among Doctoral Students* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1964), microfilm, p. 40.

⁸Tucker, p. 47.

⁷Tucker, p. 61.

⁸Tucker, p. 50.

⁹Tucker, p. 50.

¹⁰In spite of the efforts of some nationalists to change the situation, the Canadian academic community is little more than an extension of its counterpart to the south. Those interested in determining the magnitude of the actual interaction between the two academic communities should consult Thomas H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies* (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975).

¹¹Max von Zur-Muehlen, Ph.D., "The Ph.D. Dilemma in Canada Revisited," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* (February, 1978), p. 79.

¹²von Zur-Muehlen, "Ph.D. Dilemma," p. 61.

¹³The term "enrolment" is the one vexing area of uncertainty in the von Zur-Muehlen analysis. It is not clear, either from the article cited here or from a series of unpublished Statistics Canada pamphlets containing the data upon which the article was based, if the term "enrolment" means "individual student" or "one student enrolled for one academic year." If it is the former, then the attrition rate in all disciplines is far higher than anyone has even guessed; but if it is the latter, then the attrition rate is probably at the sufficiently-distressing levels estimated by Dr. Tucker and Dr. von Zur-Muehlen. I have not attempted to deal with this difficult question, for the issue cannot be approached in any definitive sense until the universities devise more accurate methods of recording enrolment. This difficulty does not significantly affect my argument, however, since I am proceeding as much from the patterns of attrition as from the actual attrition itself.

¹⁴von Zur-Muehlen, "Ph.D. Dilemma," table 22, p. 80.

¹⁵Ralph Nader explores the convolutions of this response over the greater part of his book. See Ralph Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed* (New York: Grossman, 1965), particularly chapter 7 on "the traffic safety establishment," which is meaningfully sub-titled "Damn the driver and spare the car."

¹⁶Tucker, p. 277.

¹⁷Allen, p. 52.

¹⁸von Zur-Muehlen, "Ph.D. Dilemma," p. 79.

¹⁹Max von Zur-Muehlen, Ph.D., "The Relationship Between Graduate Degrees Awarded and Enrolment by Level and by Discipline," unpublished pamphlet (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1977), p. 19.

²⁰Tucker, p. 278.

²¹Tucker, p. 205.

²²Tucker, p. 278.

²³Tucker, pp. 132-3.

²⁴Allen, p. 69.

²⁵Tucker, p. 188.

²⁶Sidney Warhaft, "A Report on Graduate Studies in English in Canada," circulated in typescript to members of the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English, 31 January, 1975, p. 7.

²⁷The institution's name has been deleted because the article argues that this university is not atypical.

²⁸For this information, I consulted all the English doctoral dissertations held in the Special Collections Department of the main library of this university.

²⁹James D. Watson, *The Double Helix* (New York: Signet, 1968), p. 30.

³⁰The possibility that universities deliberately devise insufficient doctoral programs as a source of funding is rather bluntly addressed by Professor Warhaft. In his report, he notes "there are considerable pressures on departments to keep student numbers up, since financing is usually tied in with enrolments, and graduate students account for a considerable share of that financing. Thus the desire to protect faculty positions and to maintain a healthy program leads all too often to compromises in course offerings and to the admission of the mediocre if not the downright unfit." pp. 20-1.

³¹Allen, pp. 106-7.

³²Since my summary of Professor Allen's recommendations is far too brief to do them justice, the reader should go to chapter nine of the study itself: "Some Suggestions by Way of a Conclusion," pp. 101-19.

³³About the unfair practices that can occur in the qualifying examination, practices that everyone has heard of and that nobody dares discuss, Professor Allen has this to say: the student "should not be asked out-of-bound questions; in fact, he probably should be asked no questions that most of the members of the examining board are unable to answer." See Allen, pp. 114-15.

³⁴David Holden, "Why Profs Can't Write," reprinted from *The New York Times* in the *Canadian Association of University Teachers Bulletin* (April, 1979), p. 16.

³⁵Alexander Taylor, "Detroit's Uphill Battle," *Time* (8 September, 1980), pp. 42-8.

³⁶*Journal of Canadian Fiction* has seen the original rejection slips upon which the four synopses are based and confirms that the synopses fairly represent the relevant features of the originals. [Editor's note]

III. SYNOPSIS OF REJECTION SLIPS⁸⁶

Journal One:

The article was first sent to an American journal. The editor replied on 19 December, 1980, and enclosed the full text of the comments of two readers. Both felt the analysis of the article was terribly wrong-headed. The first reader protested against the use of dated studies such as Professor Allen's book, and said that, at present, "a great surfeit [of Ph.D.s] has brought reluctance of students to complete programs and considerable attrition from both programs and the profession." This reader felt that the comparatively low attrition rates from doctoral programs in the sciences were explicable mainly in economic terms. The longer completion times and more ponderous dissertations of successful candidates in the humanities and social sciences could be defended by noting "differences in the way research is conducted," though the precise nature of those differences was not specified. Further, in a passage quoted favourably by the second reader, the first asks: "Where has this author been for the last ten years? . . . The reduction of doctoral candidates viewed with alarm in this paper is a consummation devoutly to be wished by most leaders of [our professional societies]." Instead, the passage continues, "The problems facing most departments are not the protraction of time for finishing the degree or the triviality of dissertations or even their style, but employment for those hardy souls who finish."

The second reader also took exception to the linkage of Allen's American book "to von Zur-Muehlen's findings about Canadian higher education a decade later," and suggested that the statistics used "are far more applicable to the Ph.D. dilemma in Canada than in the U.S." He summarized: "The 1980's are not the 1960's; humanists and social scientists are not identical and hence require different periods of apprenticeship; the situation in the U.S. differs from . . . Canada," and "the dominant simile of Detroit = Ph.D. production is just as faulty." Instead, he cited the English program at his ivy-league university as an instance of success in the humanities. There, most candidates over the previous three years had apparently completed the degree in four or five years, and only one candidate "had been terminated." The article had to be reshaped in the light of "what so many of us feel are the *real* problems besetting graduate programs." And, without questions, "this essay will not fit our criteria."

Journal Two:

The second journal was Canadian. The editor replied on 5 May, 1981, and offered a résumé of the reports written by his readers. "Because of its special nature," the editor commented, "I submitted this paper to more than the usual number of readers." In general, "they were all interested very much by the issues it raises, but felt

that it should not be published [by us]." There were two reasons for this. First, "it does not fall within the normal scope of the journal;" and second, the argument, with additional data, "should rightly be part of a symposium that could do fuller justice to this complex problem." In that connection, the editor promised to "call the possibility of such a discussion" to the attention of a national academic association.

The editor also noted that the argument relied too much "on Allen and Tucker, out-of-date and largely non-Canadian data and commentary." He suggested I remedy the deficiency by consulting the Warhaft report, and concluded by saying "we shall be happy to receive further material from you."

Journal Three:

The editor of the third journal, also Canadian-published, replied on 3 November, 1981, and offered "a synthesis of our readers' comments." He stressed the fact that "the paper has been well considered" since "four readers have been canvassed." While the readers found the article "a well-written and intriguing piece of writing," and while the editors themselves were "acutely conscious of the quality of the several essays you had already published," the journal nonetheless decided "not to accept your interesting paper." There were three reasons for this.

First, the research was too dependent "on a limited number of badly outdated sources." The paper uses American studies "written in the 1960s," and "ignores work of a similar orientation about Canada done more recently in this country." Second, the concept of a "branch-plant doctorate . . . is not fully enough addressed" by the argument. "Either the paper is misnamed or it fails to bring hard data and convincing evidence in making its case about Canadian universities." And third, the paper depends largely upon "analogies" and "assumptions" that, "while well presented, may give the careful reader considerable cause to object." In sum, "there seems less of logic than of personal animus in the presentation," a feature that "bothered several of our readers."

Although the editors regretted "having to reply in such unfavorable terms," they still concluded: "we wish you well with the paper." They suggested either submitting the essay to another journal, or a re-submission of the essay "significantly revised."

Journal Four:

The editor of the fourth journal, again published in Canada, replied on 4 January, 1982, to announce that he had read the article on the previous day in order "to decide whether it should be sent to referees for review." His conclusion was that "it should not be evaluated by our consulting editors for a number of reasons" which he would "try to explain in the next few lines."

He started "on a positive note," and conceded "I found some degree of interest in the facts and ideas you tried to vehicle in your article. However, I failed to recognize the specific contribution your article was aiming at." The use of "Tucker's and Allen's findings and criticisms" was "informative but it really brings out little new." The survey of relevant literature should have been "more extensive," and "from a structural point of view" the article "needs to be completely re-thought."

"If you intend to improve this article," the editor summed up, "I suggest that you have it read by a couple of trustworthy professional friends to get their comments." He finished by wishing me "Happy New Year and good luck in all your endeavors."

IV. REBUTTAL

"Where has this author been for the last ten years?" the readers of *Journal One* demanded in concert. The question deserves an answer. For the full length of that period, from the academic year 1969/70 to the academic year 1979/80, I had been floundering about in the sordid academic morass I depicted through the statistical data of the article. I had commenced conventionally enough, taking a master of arts degree in English literature at Dalhousie in 1967, attaining first-division marks in all courses and thesis work. After teaching full-time for two years, I then enrolled in the doctoral program in English literature at one of our major universities. Across three years of full-time study, I completed my course work, again attaining first-division grades in everything. I also completed my language requirements, and successfully passed my comprehensive examinations. In my third year of study, I was awarded a Canada Council doctoral fellowship, which I held for two years. Upon the expiration of my fellowship, I continued to work full-time as a lecturer; and, as is the custom, I also finished my dissertation, writing whenever time was available. My dissertation was an evaluative study of four contemporary Canadian novels: and, at the time of final submission, nine of the book's eleven chapters had been published as separate articles in four reputable scholarly journals, and two of those articles had been reprinted in two other reputable scholarly collections. Yet my university refused me permission to defend that dissertation in a final oral examination, and therefore I do not have the degree. The story is far more common than anyone, including most academics, would believe.

While scholarly debate in the humanities is necessarily less precise and more subjective than its counterpart in either the physical or biological sciences, nevertheless most of the salient facts in my case are beyond dispute. Once my advisory committee refused to examine my dissertation, arguing it was insufficient in its submitted form, I published it in that form under the title *A Due Sense of Differences: An Evaluative Approach to Canadian Literature*.

ture; and it received favorable reviews in *The Canadian Forum*, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *Modern Fiction Studies* and *English Studies in Canada*. On the strength of some of those reviews, and with the support of three established scholars in the field, I won an appeal before the executive committee of the senior faculty council at my university. That body, the institution's final court of academic appeal, recommended to the Faculty of Graduate Study that "a regularly constituted Ph.D. examination committee be struck to conduct the final examination of Mr. Cude's thesis." Confronted with that recommendation, the English department deliberated for a year, and then flatly refused to form the necessary committee. When I attempted to reopen the issue with the executive committee, requesting an examination before a duly-constituted examining board formed of qualified persons from outside the institution, the President of the university personally intervened. He refused to allow the matter to be considered further, and I was left to contemplate the subtlety of what had been done. Strictly speaking, I had not been failed, in the very final moments of my program. I had just not been permitted to pass. At our modern universities, the faculty can break the rules with impunity, since they both make and enforce those rules.

Every year, in the universities of the United States and Canada, thousands of doctoral candidates withdraw from their programs without taking their degrees. Every year, by far the greatest number of those candidates are enrolled in the humanities and social sciences. These are all people who were supposedly scrutinized very carefully by the faculty for evidence of scholarly ability. These are all people who had established both talent and motivation, in years of study at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The faculty imply that all these people, in their thousands every year, withdraw voluntarily; but I know better. Like most of these people, I have an academic transcript that blandly states: "thesis incomplete." Nowhere in the formal university records is there any mention of my appeal, or any reference to the fact that the recommendation of the appeal tribunal was ignored by the department concerned. But I most emphatically did not withdraw voluntarily. I was denied a final examination, in defiance of the institution's own rules. Faculty collegiality ensures that such embarrassments do not become public, when students are thus forced out of the institutions. So such embarrassments continue unchecked, year after year, building a legacy of scholarship distorted. It is a legacy that hurts us all, and should be replaced by something more consistent with our ideals of academic honor and justice. "In Canada," the protagonist of John Metcalf's *General Ludd* declaims to a brace of astonished Soviet authors, "all literature is, in effect, *samizdat*." Boy, do I know what he means.

Since some of the professional readers felt that my article might

have been informed by a bitter personal experience, the next question logically arises: why was that experience not part of the article? Anyone familiar with editorial attitudes prevalent in today's academic publishing circles will know the answer to that. Academics are supposed to be "objective" in their research, and any direct reference to personal experience in an argument is automatically taken as a weakness. The flaw in that attitude, as I recognized fully when I wrote the article, is revealed by the logician and psychologist George Spencer Brown in his curious little book on love entitled *Only Two Can Play This Game*.

If you read a modern university textbook on, shall we say, psychology, you would think the author didn't have any experience of his own. I know that the reason given for this extraordinary omission is that, in respect of one's own experience, one is likely to be biased and therefore not "objective." But if you cannot be honest about your own experience, how the hell can you expect to be honest about anyone else's? And if you think you are likely to be "mistaken" about your own experience, how much more likely are you to be mistaken about somebody else's experience, of which, by definition, you have no experience? (p. 13)

Although I could readily admit the force of Brown's observations, I also understood that few academics reading professionally for a scholarly journal would be prepared to do so. I therefore omitted my personal story, opting instead for a more neutral analysis of statistics and professional observations; and the consternation of the readers of *Journal Three* with their "sense" of "personal animus in the presentation" indicates, I suspect, that my reservations about the tolerance of most academics for personal experience were well-founded.

Given that the readers of *Journal Three* were astute in detecting a hint of "personal" experience in my article, though, should I then concede that the argument is thereby weakened? On the contrary. As Brown pointed out, personal experience is often highly relevant, and nowhere is this more evident than right here. Yes, I felt, and still feel, that the doctoral program can and does function as nothing short of a cruel fraud. But, more than that, blast it all, I can prove it. My so-called "animus" is not a mindless fit of petty pique; it is a perfectly justified resentment of serious abuses that deprive my discipline of dignity and meaning. First, I can demonstrate that Western scholars can and will use their academic authority to block a promising line of research done by a student working under them, even when that research is producing results winning the respect of other scholars in the discipline. Second, and more alarming, I can demonstrate that close colleagues of Western scholars acting in that way will themselves support the action, long after any possible

justification for such support would seem nonexistent to an impartial observer. And third, and most alarming of all, I can demonstrate that Western scholars in general just don't want to hear about the possibility of this sort of thing, even when it is couched in a relatively restrained analysis relying upon widespread and sustained statistical evidence. I can demonstrate, in short, the truth of what Solzhenitsyn told his audience at Harvard in 1978. Is that not of concern to us all? Is that not of particular concern to the readers of this journal, who should be acutely conscious of how much of the development of Canadian letters still remains in academic hands? Studies assessing the nature and scope of Canadian literature are mainly produced by academics; committees awarding grants to scholarly authors are formed, in the main, of academics; and most major journals are instruments of the universities. That all this must produce distortions, in favor of conservatism and mediocrity, I most strongly and sincerely believe. But my emotion is the offspring of my very real knowledge — not a substitute for it.

Because I know that there are many stories like mine cloaked in the anonymity of the Tucker and von Zur-Muehlen surveys, I also know I must address one final challenge to what I am doing here. If matters are as I have said, and many dropouts have in truth been forced out of the doctoral program, why haven't many of them complained? As I reflect upon the resentment, the anger, the frustrations, and — yes — the doubts about myself that my experience generated in me, I do not wonder that most others simply walked away from their defeat and silently tried to commence a constructive life elsewhere. So many factors would counsel, so eloquently, against fighting what must seem insurmountable odds. First, in any dispute between established instructors and a disgruntled student, the student is impractical indeed who does not see at the outset that the sympathies of even the most impartial of adjudicators must be with the instructors. Second, in any assessment of what transpired between instructors and student, only the efforts of the student could be objectively explored through assignments, examinations and research projects: the efforts of the instructors cannot be examined at all, for they are nowhere set down, save in the relatively uninformative area of comments upon the student's work. And third, and perhaps most convincing of all, every student contemplating a protest is also a person actively seeking another career: and mounting a protest means above all proclaiming oneself a failure, and a belligerent failure at that, which is hardly an auspicious way to begin anew. In this connection, we should not overlook a convenient idiosyncrasy of most university regulations: a doctoral candidate is only credited with the more subjective stages of the program, the comprehensive examinations and the dissertation, upon successful completion; a doctoral candidate withdrawing voluntarily before attaining those stages, however, is not usually

recorded as a failure — whatever the real circumstances behind the withdrawal. Such a candidate can often claim success in course work, to be supported by a transcript giving passing grades for the courses and “incomplete” for the other requirements; and so such a candidate, ironically, can convert total failure into partial success — a workable basis for a new career. Thus it is that Abou Ben Dropout comes to accept the category of “A.B.D.” as he enters law school or business or government or secondary education. He has at least learned, in the words of the old Scots proverb, to save his breath to cool his porridge. And I, for one, cannot honestly blame him.

Let us turn now, briefly, to the arguments against my article advanced in the rejection slips. The readers of *Journal One* protest against my linkage of the Tucker and von Zur-Muehlen studies, on the grounds those studies occurred in different countries at different times; but they ignore, in doing so, the two facts I cite that warrant this linkage. First, both studies concern the doctoral program, an academic institution that has proliferated across the United States and Canada over the past four decades without undergoing any fundamental change. And second, there is a remarkable consistency in the statistical patterns recorded by both studies: as the statistics move from the biological and physical sciences through the social sciences and thence to the humanities, the program takes longer, the attrition rate increases dramatically, and the final dissertation becomes much longer. Further evidence in both studies suggests this is a development largely confined to the doctoral program, and is basically due to the research requirement — a highly subjective area of study. Nothing written by either of the readers of *Journal One* even begins to explain these phenomena. The tired rationalization that these phenomena are caused by poor employment prospects in the humanities just will not withstand inspection, for the phenomena are found in the Tucker study, which is based on “a nine-year (enrollment during the fall term 1953 to graduation on or before December 31, 1962) elapse period” (p. 25), an era which both readers of *Journal One* will recognize as a time of rapid expansion in employment for all possessors of the doctorate. Nor should the vague intimation that these phenomena are legitimately caused by “differences in the way research is conducted” be allowed to pass uncontested, since the readers of *Journal One* nowhere indicate exactly what those differences might be and why they are legitimate; and this omission is particularly noteworthy in the light of my own hypothesis that the difference is simply unchecked subjectivity on the part of the instructors, an hypothesis the readers of *Journal One* refuse to address. These are people who can hail as “a consummation devoutly to be wished” the incredible hemorrhage of qualified students from their discipline, a condition poisoned by frustration, anger and wholesale wastage of time, effort and money, without bothering to examine all the possible underlying

ing causes. Their values are sadly revealed in the declaration that “the problems facing most departments are not the protraction of time for finishing the degrees or the triviality of dissertations or even their style, but employment for those hardy souls who finish.” This is the “me generation” come to scholarship, thinkers who prize employment above academic excellence; it is scarcely surprising, therefore, they would find insuperable difficulties in what I am trying to say.

It is actually a relief to move on to the response of *Journal Two*, since there at least we can detect an honest concession that the article constitutes a viable approach to an existing problem. The editor read and understood the paper, and took the somewhat unusual step of circulating it among “more than the usual number of readers”; and they, on their part, all indicated an interest in “the issues it raises.” The rejection itself was justified by two reasons, both tenable. First, the article “does not fall within the normal scope of the journal, as defined by its usual contents;” and second, the analysis with additional data “should rightly be part of a symposium that could do fuller justice to this complex problem.” The editor pledged himself to bring “the possibility of such a discussion” to the attention of a professional association to which he belonged, and suggested I send the article to a journal concerned more directly with professional matters. Although he did brush against the charge that I relied “too much” on “out-of-date and largely non-Canadian data and commentary,” a charge that certainly downplays the importance I assign the von Zur-Muehlen studies, the editor supported it fairly with a specific reference to the Warhaft report. I had not used the Warhaft report because I thought the more recent date and vastly more comprehensive scope of the von Zur-Muehlen study relieved me of any obligation to do so, but I now was forced to recognize the way that omission might well be construed in subsequent submissions. Mainly to close that loophole, then, I incorporated some amplifying material from the Warhaft report in the article before sending it off again. But I was tremendously heartened by the treatment I had been accorded in this rejection, and I even went so far as to hope my article might see print through the usual academic process after all.

I trust the readers of *Journal of Canadian Fiction* can see why the response from *Journal Three* did so much to disabuse me of that notion. In so many ways similar to the rejection from *Journal Two*, this response disappoints much more acutely because it strives more painfully to find a plausible pretext for dismissing a disconcerting and unpopular line of analysis. These editors were generous in their praise of this and other efforts of mine, a generosity that seems all the more puzzlingly at odds with the conclusions they ultimately reached. The most tangible objection seemed the now-standard complaint, that “the research is heavily dependent on a limited

number of badly outdated sources." In support of this charge, the editorial staff specified that "most of the sources are American and written in the 1960's, while the paper ignores work of a similar orientation about Canada done more recently in this country." When I read that, I felt horribly akin to Pandora, gazing with fascination at a curiously-worked and strangely-ominous box. I could sense these editors wished me well in general, and I had — and still have — a respect for their judgment, but I also had to discover exactly what it was they felt I had missed. I applied directly to one of the editors for that information, and I quote his reply fully on the point.

My sources tell me that you are best to write directly to the ministries of education in the various provinces. There was, for instance, a survey on graduate education done by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities (I believe in 1977). There have also been brochures done by Statistics Canada on the subject of graduate education over the past decade or so. Finally, though I can't be as specific as I would like about bibliographical details, I am told that a study by Max von Zur-Muehlen is of particular interest in this field.

First, the reference to the provincial studies is an academic red herring: the statistical data therein must be largely if not totally subsumed in the von Zur-Muehlen survey, which the sources themselves stress as "of particular interest in this field." Second, an article of several thousand words cannot repeat all the findings of all the studies in a broad and heavily-documented field, especially when its purpose is to explain the most salient features of the data available: all it can reasonably be asked to achieve is an accurate and fair assessment of the material cited. And third, my article does in fact refer in sufficient detail to both the Statistics Canada brochures (specifically the unpublished von Zur-Muehlen study of master's and doctoral degrees) and the published von Zur-Muehlen article. Consequently I cannot regard the journal's primary objection as having much intellectual force.

If I had still nurtured any lingering hopes that my article would appear in the standard academic manner, the response from Journal Four was enough to extinguish them utterly. Never before have I had an article bounce back with such alacrity, and there is something repellently open about the frank brutality of the accompanying editorial hatchet job. This editor, though he could find "some degree of interest in the facts and ideas" I "tried to vehicle," nonetheless had great difficulty grasping precisely what I happened to be "aiming at." Of course, he would not disturb his staff by exposing them to this sort of stuff; and naturally he would fire it back as soon as possible, commending me in any attempt at revision to the guidance of "a couple of trustworthy professional friends." Well there, in any event, I was way ahead of him. "Why do you continue beating your head against the wall?" the question goes in

the hoary old joke. "Because it feels so good when I stop." The answer is adequate, I think, to explain what impelled me to leave off circulating the article and to hand this whole presentation over to Bob Sorfleet and the *Journal of Canadian Fiction*.

I cannot expect this presentation will convince many academics already successfully embarked upon their careers. No matter how well disposed they might be to my previous work, even how well disposed some might be to me personally, this they cannot bring themselves to accept. They have invested themselves in another vision of their world, and they cannot see — as the rejection slips reveal — what I am asking them to see. Here, "cannot" and "will not" have become indistinguishable. Darwin wryly confronted much the same problem in the concluding chapter of *The Origin of Species*.

Although I am fully convinced of the truth of the views given in this volume under the form of an abstract, I by no means expect to convince experienced naturalists whose minds are stocked with a multitude of facts all viewed, during a long course of years, from a point of view directly opposed to mine. It is so easy to hide our ignorance under such expressions as the "plan of creation," "unity of design," etc., and to think that we give an explanation when we only restate a fact. Any one whose disposition leads him to attach more weight to unexplained difficulties than to the explanation of a certain number of facts will certainly reject my theory. A few naturalists, endowed with much flexibility of mind, and who have already begun to doubt on the immutability of species, may be influenced by this volume; but I look with confidence to the future, to young and rising naturalists, who will be able to view both sides of the question with impartiality. (Pelican edition, p. 453)

The statistics I have quoted, and the reforms I have urged, have all been accessible to university faculties for decades: and yet, nothing was done to produce significant and salutary change. Reform of the doctoral program, therefore, if left exclusively to the university faculties, simply will not occur.

For whom, then, do I write? Like Darwin, for the scholars of the future, particularly those possessors of the master's degree who have not yet embarked upon the uncertainties of the doctoral venture. In the humanities and social sciences, there is little or no academic advantage such scholars can acquire from doctoral work, since they already possess the research skills necessary to contribute to their disciplines: given access to a well-stocked library, there is nothing they could accomplish after years of doctoral work that they could not achieve without that expenditure of time, effort and money, resources better directed into studies of their own choosing and devising. And why should they face odds of well over fifty percent against successful completion of the degree, odds having

little to do with the pursuit of excellence, odds greater than they faced at either the bachelor's or master's level, when there is so little to gain and so much to lose? Far better that these potential candidates turn elsewhere for further training, to a second master's degree, or law school, or business administration, or the work force itself, acquiring additional skills that could enrich their current intellectual pursuits and open additional sources of income. A majority of them will save literally years of frustration and wasted effort while advancing both themselves and society; and the resulting decline in doctoral enrolment will force individual university faculties to implement reforms long overdue, in order to compete more effectively for the reduced number of doctoral candidates naive enough, hopeful enough or cynical enough to continue braving the odds. Adam Smith's "hidden hand" of economic suasion will bring about what no amount of well-meant exhortation can. It is my honest wish that we will see, over the next few decades in North America, a marked decline in doctoral enrolment, soon followed by a publicized series of reforms in the doctoral programs, all functioning to produce thereafter an increase in genuine scholarly achievement from both the graduates of the revitalized programs and those more independent souls who dared to choose a second route to academic excellence. Should that come to pass, the anguish and waste endured by those of us earlier entrapped in the process will not have been entirely in vain.

V. AFTERWORD

During the past four years, I have had occasion to discuss with many academics the broad and complex issues raised in this presentation. Sooner or later, I would inevitably be asked: "Why didn't you sue your university?" I must confess that I had given serious thought to that possibility, since the institution had patently breached its intellectual, moral and legal responsibilities to me as a student. A lawyer friend of mine, who had accompanied me to the final appeal hearing, summed up the situation neatly in a letter to the institution's President. The appeals committee, "after a full hearing with the parties present in person and in accordance with the rules of the university and in accordance with the principles of natural justice required by the case law, passed a resolution," he pointed out: "in our opinion, the court would require that the resolution be complied with by the university." Nor did the collective refusal of an entire department to provide examiners relieve the university of its obligation to comply with the appeals committee resolution. "If, as [the Dean of Graduate Studies] says in his correspondence, the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research cannot constitute a committee from incumbent members of the faculty, then the university must constitute a committee from other competent persons." This was answered, following a pause of some months, by a note to my friend

from the President's secretary. "The President has now asked me to indicate to you that the matter of Mr. Cude's petition will not be pursued further within the university." So much for the efficacy of the student-appeals process, conducted "in accordance with the rules of the university and in accordance with the principles of natural justice as required by the case law." What, then, of an appeal to the law itself?

I could indeed, as my lawyer friend immediately advised me, have taken the matter to the courts. However, I would not be suing individuals, but the university itself; and I would thus be confronted in the legal process with the formidable resources of a large public institution, resources in staff, money and time that I could simply not afford to match. The fruitless appeal process had already consumed four years and all my disposable funds. To attend the final appeal hearing alone, I had to spend over seven hundred dollars — a minor indication of the prohibitive financial burden a sustained legal contest would impose. Over the previous year, my entire income had been derived from one summer course and unemployment insurance. Over the next year, I had found one evening course and some other casual employment. This was scarcely a financial base to support an extensive venture into the law, as the authorities at my university no doubt understood full well. The relative impecuniosity of an unemployed junior academic is, after all, one of the harsh realities that helps the doctoral program survive any serious challenge. And that brings me back to Solzhenitsyn's central criticism of Western scholarship, a criticism this presentation is intended to illustrate and to drive home.

In the Soviet Union, as our academic journals tell us with proper indignation, dissident academics can be deprived of their professional credentials, driven from their jobs, denied access to other employment, and forced to subsist as economic unpersons in some nebulous social substructure. I must confess I sometimes feel an eerie kinship with those victims. I have a master's degree in English literature. I am the author of a scholarly book, which is gradually winning some recognition. I have written many other articles, of which this is one. I have just finished the second draft of a monograph developing the views of this presentation. But no university will hire me full-time without the doctorate, which I now do not have and of course can now never earn. Like so many dropouts before me — and yes, I will be listed at my university as a dropout, since I didn't fail anything, remember — I must look elsewhere for a livelihood. It would be dishonest to minimize the difficulties of the situation, since those are fully recognized in the profession. Over forty and with only a master's degree, so my friendly counsellors at Canada Manpower tell me, I am too old and too highly qualified to apply for retraining in a trade. With no business experience, as the national economy falters, there is no

work for me in most commercial enterprises. Should I be foolish enough to take a provincial teaching certificate, my academic qualifications would place me at the top of the union pay scale, and most school boards would be reluctant to hire such a costly employee with no high school experience; and yet, without the provincial certificate, no school board would be allowed to hire me at all. Even further professional training, the traditional refuge of the dropout, is not at present a viable consideration: not many graduates from the law schools are finding work, and chartered accountants are beginning to be laid off. I trust I have sufficiently underscored Solzhenitsyn's point. The mechanics for academic repression here are more subtle than those in the East, but are nonetheless shockingly pervasive and effective. And so it is that our scholarship continues to languish in its own soft shackles, fettered to the idols of the prevailing fad with the spongy bonds of compliance and indifference.

Yet it is harder to kill a book than a career, whatever the system of repression used, which is one reason people write them. I have elected to continue with my writing, in the hope that I might earn other credentials to replace those my university has so arbitrarily denied me. A book of some merit endures, no matter what pressures time and chance may exert upon it. This is the message of my own first study, applied to four classic novels that will continue to be cherished by the reading public. Long after we have all passed away, those novels will last: and my study, predicting that outcome, will last with them. As the favorable consensus concerning my research slowly builds among disinterested practitioners of the discipline, the sad inadequacies of what my university has done will become sufficiently apparent. An initial consensus is not necessarily conclusive, as every scholar must recognize; but any consensus at all can be indicative of what the scholarly community will decide over time, if it is consistent with principles of logic and the intellectual traditions of the discipline. On that score, at least, I am fully satisfied. Ultimately, the reception of the book is the one true prize a scholar can win. And, of itself, it is enough.

But what of our doctoral program, which claims to be structured in a fashion calculated to encourage junior scholars to seek and to win that one true prize? The response of the reviewers of my book, fixed like the study itself in the immutability of print, must raise doubts about the way doctoral research is currently conducted on our continent. Few examining committees assembled within any English department in the country could exceed the aggregate of professional credentials of those who have already given my work favorable notice, but their collective judgment, astonishingly in harmony on the essential features of the research despite the widely-admitted subjectivity of the discipline involved, is one that a modern Western university can completely disregard under the prevailing academic system. Since that is the way things

WILFRED CUDE

“Attrition from Doctoral Programs: An Alternative Analysis”

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