
In Britannia's Issue, Howard Weinbrot presents us with a massive book on an important subject. His theme is the development of literary and cultural nationalism in Britain across the Restoration and eighteenth century, a theme he elaborates through the examination of a series of comparative cultural contexts (modern British culture vis-à-vis those of ancient Greece, ancient Rome, modern France, Old Testament Hebraism, Celtic Scotland, and Gothic antiquity). By discussing these various contexts of cultural encounter, he seeks to show two things: the increasing value placed on specifically "native" characteristics and virtues, and, equally, the emulative appropriation and surpassing of whatever was deemed of most value in the other cultures. Although Weinbrot prefers the language of concordia discors, the account he offers of eighteenth-century British culture might easily be recast—in keeping with the culture's own sense of superiority—as a quasi-Hegelian synthesis and Aufhebung in which the "truth" of outmoded cultural formations is preserved and transcended in modern British civilization. In Weinbrot's account, eighteenth-century British culture is both exclusive and inclusive: it is characterized, on the one hand, by insistent reference to defining particularities of "Clime, Nature, and Customs of the People" (William Walsh, 694; quoted on p. 155), particularities that led writers of the period to distinguish fundamentally both between antiquity and modern/Christian/enlightened civilization, and between British society and other, alien and inferior, societies. On the other hand, eighteenth-century British society is self-consciously synthetic, hybrid and heterogeneous in its composition, and thus open to emulating, adapting and incorporating the best of other cultures and traditions. This more accommodating aspect of eighteenth-century British culture is elaborated by Weinbrot in a consideration of the significance of "minority" cultural traditions—Jewish and Celtic (Scottish)—in what he refers to as the eighteenth-century British "amalgam."

Weinbrot's discussion of these various cross-cultural and intercultural contexts is conducted through a wealth of primary quotations and references that is clearly the result of immense erudition. Weinbrot writes in his introduction, "I have consumed over a decade on research and a baker's dozen of years from the book's conception to birth" (12), but he might, without exaggeration, have suggested that the book was the product of his thirty-odd years of research and publishing on eighteenth-century literature. The book's five major sections embody both a summa of much of his previous work and an extension of its range. (Weinbrot himself refers to his three previous books and nine of his essays for further elaboration of local issues in this book.) The topics addressed range from the fortunes of specific genres (epic, ode), to characterizations of the English language as an embodiment of the English national character; from the religious dimensions of eighteenth-century literary culture, to the relationship between the expansion of British commerce over the face of the globe and the consolidation of a nationalist poetics and aesthetics; from the articulation in the early eighteenth century of a poetic canon of successive British worthies, to extended discussion of specific texts
Weinbrot’s amassing of information relevant to his major theme is extraordinary, and his footnotes might serve as a veritable finding-list for contemporary sources addressing questions of British national cultural identity. His discussions of the religious (Judeo-Christian) contexts of eighteenth-century British literature and of the perceived affinities between the English language and Hebrew, between English literary style and “Oriental” extravagance, are especially interesting and informative.

Despite the wealth of information presented in Britannia’s Issue, however, the book affords only quite limited interpretive elaboration of the issues it raises. Such limitation is in part deliberately chosen by Weinbrot, but carries, in my view, several regrettable consequences. Weinbrot describes his project as a “chronicle” of the increasing confidence in the native literary tradition and its values (191), and the term is an apt characterization of the methodological procedures and limitations of the book. On the simplest level, this means that we are often given compendia of extracts from a whole series of authors in order to establish the prevalence of a given outlook or attitude in the period, but the evidence of the citations is sometimes casually evaluated. Discussing the vogue for Anglicized “Pindaric” odes initiated by Abraham Cowley and extending through much of the eighteenth century, Weinbrot writes:

One reason for such lasting influence was fame by national association, or . . . recognition of the bold and sublime native talent and temperament that blended with Pindaric virtues. Edward Young . . . and William Tasker . . . associate Pindaric soaring with Shakespearean fire. In 1675 Edward Phillips argues that the Cowleyan irregular ode would be excellent in tragedy, and that the highest forms of poetry are sublime and inventive, as in Milton. By 1695 John Dennis tells us that . . . he resolved to imitate Milton while imitating Pindar, for each shared “several great qualities.” Several years later, Jabez Hughes evokes and adapts Milton for his own Pindaric on the incarnation. Shortly thereafter, Isaac Watts also associates “the free and unconfin’d Numbers of Pindar” with “the noble Measures of Milton, without Rhyme as best able to maintain dignity, devotion,” and rapturous spiritual love. (342–43)

This paragraph (I have not omitted anything material) certainly suggests that, among English writers, Shakespeare and especially Milton were taken to exemplify or approximate the Pindaric manner. But there is nothing here to suggest a perceived elective affinity between English poetry in general and the Pindaric manner, nothing suggesting a “national association” based on a “bold and sublime” temperament shared exclusively or preeminently by English poets in general and Pindar. Similarly, there are paragraphs in which an author’s statement that British writers ought to unchain themselves from subjection to the classics is taken as evidence of the robust independence of British literary values, or in which the conditional argument that “with proper linguistic stability and training for its speakers, English can transcend its modern and equal its ancient Latin competitors” (75) is taken as evidence
of contemporary belief in the present sufficiency of the English language, rather than its present, but reversible, decay. In such paragraphs, and there are too many of them in this book, the catalogue of "evidence" presented is indifferent for establishing the specific claim at hand, and consequently, it calls for and induces lazy reading.

More generally, there is a tendency to reduce the evaluation of eighteenth-century cultural attitudes into an enumeration of opposing lists of figures "for" and "against," say, Homer. In part, this is a function of the sheer volume of material that Weinbrot is presenting, and is thus a concomitant of one of the strengths of the book. But it is also indicative, I think, of the methodological assumptions at work in this project.

In the introduction, Weinbrot describes his conception of the appropriate procedure of historicist scholarship, a procedure that involves, I have suggested, a severe curtailment of interpretive ambitions. He borrows Edmund Burke's formulations in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (2nd ed., 1759), and uses them as a kind of model of appropriate interpretive humility. Objecting to "the New Historical fallacy of the lonely exemplar, in which the often peculiar is assumed to be typical" (11), Weinbrot writes, "My own approach is closer to that characterized by Edmund Burke" and offers us a couple of exemplary quotations from this author by way of elaboration:

"The greater number of . . . comparisons we make, the more general and the more certain our knowledge is like to prove, as built upon a more extensive and perfect induction. . . . If an enquiry thus carefully conducted, should fail at last of discovering the truth, it may answer an end perhaps as useful, in discovering to us the weakness of our own understanding. If it does not make us knowing, it may make us more modest. If it does not preserve us from error, it may at least from the spirit of error, and may make us cautious of pronouncing with positiveness or with haste, when so much labour may end in so much uncertainty." (12)

"He [the author] has shown it [the present text] to some of his friends, men of learning and candour, who do not think it wholly unreasonable; and he now ventures to lay it before the public, proposing his notions as probable conjectures, not as things certain and indisputable; and if he has any where expressed himself more positively, it was owing to inattention." (14-15)

Weinbrot uses these statements to buttress his view that the scholar's job is first to present the evidence and then to frame hypotheses, but never to lose sight of the speculative and merely tentative character of the latter. In practice, this cautionary stance means that Weinbrot's assessment of eighteenth-century British literary culture takes itself to be objective reportage of publicly articulated, explicitly stated views and attitudes from the period, a chronicle in which the inductive evidence has been elaborated at length and the speculative hypotheses have been pared down to a minimum.

In Weinbrot's hands, Burke's caution is thus re-worked to approximate the claim that a scholar should seek to present the outlooks and attitudes of the
past in their own terms, to let the past speak for itself, as it were, with minimal extraneous commentary and editorializing. This outlook, however, differs radically from Burke's intentions and procedures in the *Enquiry*. Burke's advocacy of what he describes as “a cautious, I had almost said, a timorous method of proceeding” works in tandem with a “philosophical” ambition to plumb the fundamental “laws of nature” regarding the excitation of our passions, an ambition that is to be realized by cross-examining the available evidence in order to get past its “obscure and intricate” appearance. Burke construes his task, in other words, not merely as accurate description but as radical analysis and explanation. Weinbrot's procedure subtends a quite other conception of “inquiry.” For Weinbrot’s cautious procedure requires not only that our conclusions not outrun our evidence, but also that we re-define the scholar's task so as to exclude critical analysis per se. Instead, the scholar's function in Weinbrot's account is confined to the faithful reproduction and transmission of authorial statements and outlooks, and is better captured in his quotation of George Bright's (1684) understanding of an editor's responsibility than it is in his quotations from Burke: “I am not to set down my own but my authors sense, be it what it will, or what others can make of it... It is not my business to make my Author, but to give him made; not to tell what the Author should say, but what he hath said; every one may take it or leave as he pleaseth” (12-13). Even Bright, we may note, does not confuse the editor's task with that of the critical reader: the latter is still left with the interpretive activity of making out what the “Authors sense” might be, as well as the evaluative activity of deciding whether this sense “pleaseth.” Weinbrot strings together Burke's comments and George Bright's without distinguishing either the diverse tasks in which they are engaged or the diverse conceptions of scholarship and critical inquiry they evidence. Instead, Weinbrot takes them to be aspects of a single, coherent critical outlook.

Such interpretive casualness is characteristic of Weinbrot's approach, and is related to the critical naivety that characterizes Weinbrot's historicist procedures. He states that he has eschewed “the Promised Land of Theory” (12), but one does not need to be a post-structuralist, nor even a dissenter from the “old” historicist style of literary scholarship, to see the inadequacies of Weinbrot's methodological assumptions. For example, Robert D. Hume, whose credentials as a traditional historicist scholar are impeccable, has commented recently that, “Only the most innocent kind of positivist could now suppose that facts add up to anything in and of themselves, or that the scholar can move inductively from particulars collected at random to broad theories somehow generated by meaning or order inherent in the facts themselves. Realistically, we now know that we begin with our own interests, values, and concerns, and that these exert a powerful determinative influence on what we study and the questions we ask about it” ("Texts Within Contexts: Notes Toward a Historical Method” Philological Quarterly 71 [1992]: 84). Weinbrot, meanwhile, continues to argue precisely for “extensive... induction” and “neutral knowledge” as an alternative to ideological criticism.

The consequences of Weinbrot's methodological “positivism” are predictable enough. Though he claims neither to endorse nor to condemn, but merely to report the attitudes of eighteenth-century British writers, Weinbrot's book, as it proceeds, increasingly acquires the character of a sustained
apology for eighteenth-century British cultural attitudes as attractively mature, generous, open, pacific, and enlightened. I can illustrate this tendency perhaps most succinctly by considering the title of his book. Weinbrot takes the phrase “Britannia’s Issue” from Gray’s poem “The Bard” (1757), a poem that recounts the Welsh tradition of the murder by Edward I of all the Welsh bards that came into his hands and the consequent termination of the bardic cultural tradition. Gray, however, recounts this tradition only to have the Welsh bard (who is the speaker of most of the poem and who commits suicide at its close) assert prophetically that this political and cultural enslavement will be annulled by the subsequent ascent of the Welsh Tudors to the English throne and the resurrection of the ancient bards in the line of English poets from the Tudor period to Gray’s own time. Looking forward to that new dispensation, Gray’s bard says: “No more our long-lost Arthur we bewail./ All hail, ye genuine Kings, Britannia’s Issue, hail!” And Weinbrot comments:

That statement is by an eighteenth-century English poet about a thirteenth-century fancied event, and British national pride and history resumed under a sixteenth-century Welsh-British queen, predicted by a Celtic Bard carrying on the wisdom of first century Druids, in turn often thought the outgrowth of itinerant Hebrew-speaking perhaps Jewish Phoenicians long before the birth of Christ, and expressed in a fifth-century BC rigidly regular, but thought irregular, Greek poetic form. So amiable and complex an amalgam exemplifies what this Britannia’s Issue is about. (14)

Weinbrot’s sense that there is an “amiable . . . amalgam” of cultures into a “British” whole, not only in Gray’s poem, but in eighteenth-century Britain at large does not merely report, but reproduces and endorses the ideology of Gray’s poem. Gray takes a then-current Welsh tradition of resentment against the Saxon destruction of their political and cultural independence, and he offers as adequate compensation the notion that the ancient Welsh bards are subsumed into and resurrected in the line of English poets from Shakespeare on down. Gray’s projection of this sentiment into the mouth of a Welsh bard only exacerbates the hegemonic relation of English to Welsh culture that his poem is designed to assuage and mystify, so that now his Welsh bard not only commits suicide but embraces his death and ratifies the ultimately fortunate character of Edward’s genocidal campaign. Weinbrot not only softens the cultural conflict and sense of loss that Gray’s poem never quite hides, but he also equivocates on the term “British” so that the Bard’s Welsh and anti-English national pride and history is transmogrified into an eighteenth-century “British national pride and history” from which the distinction between English and Welsh national identity has been erased. So “amiable” an assimilation of the Welsh into the English reflects neither the cultural geography of eighteenth-century Britain nor the continuing attitudes of hostility and/or contempt that stretch from, for example, the poem on “The guile and softness of the Saxon race” composed c.1690 by the so-called Brogynyn Poet, to the Welsh poet Iolo Morganwg’s (Edward Williams’s) sole encounter with Samuel Johnson, at a bookseller’s in London in the 1770s (an
incident recounted by Herbert Wright in the *Review of English Studies* 8 (1932): 131–32.

The limitation of Weinbrot’s approach is most evident in the number of issues his book raises but either never confronts in a sustained manner, or glosses over in an easy resolution. Much of his evidence suggests that eighteenth-century British writers were aware not only of cultural diversity laid atop a common human nature, but indeed that such diversity entailed an acknowledgment of the cultural and historical relativism of beliefs, values, norms. Nevertheless, Weinbrot’s account also makes clear that these writers had increasing confidence in the superiority of their own cultural assumptions. Weinbrot never seeks to address either the sources or the consequences of the tension, if not contradiction, between these two contemporary outlooks. Rather, they simply coexist (harmoniously) in his account as they do, we are led to believe, in the period. Similarly, Weinbrot writes that eighteenth-century British cultural attitudes were able to “reconcile nationalism and cosmopolitanism, xenophobia and ‘xenophilia’” (148–49), but this successful “reconciliation remains largely an asserted claim with little attempt to explore the conflicts registered. Weinbrot writes of “the synthetic compromise that characterizes the complex eighteenth-century British identity,” and adds that “there also was mistrust, suspicion, and outright hostility as well as competition or emulation of the best sort” (74). But, again, the characterization of eighteenth-century British culture as conflict-ridden is largely ignored as Weinbrot proceeds to describe the amiable synthesis and harmony of the period. Linda Colley has recently commented on the war-like character of eighteenth-century British culture (“Britishness and Otherness” *Journal of British Studies* 31 [1992]: 311), and Weinbrot acknowledges that the “eighteenth-century was ravaged by terrible and costly wars” but argues that they “nonetheless required anti-war psychology—of war to end war, or war only to repel a terrible enemy, or war to protect God’s people” (146). But if “war to end war” is genuinely an example of anti-war psychology, war “to protect God’s people” (and often to extend their glory) functions equally as an apology for imperialism. Moreover, Weinbrot’s easy identification of such rationales for making war, with pacifism and pacific ideals seems to me ill advised, and—as with so much of the interpretive commentary in this book—to obscure complexities, tensions, and hostilities evident in the material he discusses.

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Postructuralist theory’s attack on the authority of texts ensured that any number of scholars would take up the unusual challenges posed by the interdisciplinary, multi-media texts of William Blake, whose illuminated poems present their audiences with remarkable difficulties—and remarkable opportunities. Few artists have exercised such thoroughgoing control over all aspects of the composition, production, and dissemination of their works. The past ten
years have seen important studies of Blake’s texts by scholars like Robert N. Essick (William Blake and the Language of Adam), Nelson Hilton (Literal Imagination: Blake’s Vision of Words, 1983), Morris Eaves (especially William Blake’s Theory of Art, 1986), and Joseph Viscomi (Blake and the Idea of the Book, 1993). The work of these scholars has at once reshaped and problematized the ways in which we conceive a Blakean “text” as, on one hand, a physical artifact containing an array of linguistic, semantic, and visual (or iconic) signifiers and, on the other, a sort of “playing-field” on which the game of communication is played with earnest delight (not to mention exertion) by Blake the coach, his verbal and visual “players,” and the onlookers/readers/viewers who make up the audience. Of course, Blake is more than just coach in this analogy; he is also owner, manager, umpire, announcer, groundskeeper, and equipment manager. It is with this latter Blake that Molly Anne Rothenberg is primarily concerned in Rethinking Blake’s Textuality.

Rothenberg’s book investigates what happens in the transaction involving Blake’s illuminated texts and the reader’s processes of perception and cognition, a subject I examined as well in Reading William Blake (1992). Rothenberg concentrates on *Jerusalem* as her “test case,” though, rather than ranging across the spectrum of the illuminated books in examining the dynamics of the reading activity those texts press upon their audience. The book splits roughly into two halves, Part Two focussed upon *Jerusalem* and Part One on the subject of authority in Blake’s texts generally. In many ways the first section seems the stronger in its more expansive and stimulating treatment of its subject: it lays out a theoretical paradigm that the section on *Jerusalem* then applies in readings that follow naturally from those theoretical premises. The particular strength of Part Two lies in the detailed readings of individual plates and passages from *Jerusalem*. In particular, Rothenberg effectively deconstructs plate 4, plate 29/33, and plates 97–99, building in her discussion on the theme of “authority questioned” which forms the central subject of Part One of the book.

*Rethinking Blake’s Textuality* elaborates upon the author’s contention that “Blake arrives at some recognizably poststructuralist positions because he is responding to the same epistemological crises that continue to shape twentieth-century philosophy” (1). This superimposition of the past upon the present (and of Blake’s ideas upon poststructuralist theory) signals immediately the author’s distance from any new-historicist effort strictly to contextualize Blake within his own times. It indicates, rather, her allegiance to assumptions about ahistoricity that underlie much of poststructuralist discourse on Blake (as represented for instance in *Unnam’d Forms: Blake and Textuality* [1986], edited by Nelson Hilton and Thomas A. Vogler, whose major contributors Rothenberg identifies as particularly influential for her own work) and that enable one to minimize historical differences in the interest of demonstrating how much like us Blake is, and how much his efforts were directed toward problems (intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual) that we like to think of as very much our own. This blurring of distinctions is apparent in the author’s suggestion that Part Two of the book “looks backward to Blake’s historical intellectual milieu and forward to the formulations and limitations of phenomenology, deconstructive poststructuralism, and radical feminism as participating in a historically specific discursive arena that happens to span
two centuries. From this perspective, Blake’s textual practice corresponds to an exension of radical skepticism, a path ignored by liberal philosophy after Kant” (6).

Some readers may feel that one flaw in the design and articulation of this interesting and insightful book comes in the over-reliance (so common in scholarship just now) on layering theory atop insight, in buttressing one’s own already sharp and useful perspectives with citation upon citation (and the accompanying theoretical jargon), as happens in Part One when an interesting discussion of Blake’s and Thomas Gray’s visions of the Welsh bards is glossed within a context of Derrida, with an additional layer of Antoine Compagnon laid on for good measure (53–58), or as happens again when Maurice Merleau-Ponty is brought in to provide a (long) analysis of “depth” (95) to back up the author’s claim that one may discern in the lower back and buttock of the male figure on plate 97 the head and torso of a woman. My quibble is not with the author’s suggestive analyses of details or concepts, but rather with the recourse to what seems, finally, an unnecessary texture of theoretical discourse that obscures where the author wishes to be—and is entirely capable of being—most clear-sighted and critically independent.

Nevertheless, there is much in this book to admire. Especially important is Rothenberg’s conviction that Blake’s “textuality” is at bottom about rhetoric (67 and elsewhere). That is, according to her insightful analysis, Blake works in Jerusalem—as in other illuminated works—to destabilize the authority of the text by exposing the fact that any text—and indeed textuality itself—is a rhetorical construct, an artifice, a device created by individuals for particular, usually manipulative purposes. Because of the centrality of “texts” to Western culture—think of our reliance on Book and Word as touchstones in legal, ethical, academic, spiritual, and aesthetic discourse—we invest words and (inscribed) documents with an often dangerous authority, typically attributing without question to their nature as documents a sanction they may very well not deserve. Rothenberg reminds us that Blake was a contemporary of a number of practitioners of “Higher Criticism,” most notably Dr. Alexander Geddes, whose work Jerome McGann has linked with Blake’s. The Higher Critics concerned themselves with reinscribing the authority of the Scriptures, locating that authority not in any sense that Scripture was literally the word of God but rather in an awareness that the Bible is a literary document and that it is therefore a constructed document whose authority derives specifically from its rhetorical force. As Rothenberg succinctly puts it, “Rhetoric—not divine agency—is the source of biblical authority” (27).

This being so, Rothenberg argues, Blake sets out in his illuminated texts to “de-sign authority” by disseminating it. In doing so, she argues, Blake rejects “the Augustinian importation of a transcendental signifier to stabilize [the] always unstable interpretive situation” (65), opting instead for a method that inherently relies upon radical destabilization both of language/sign/signifier and of the notion of the existence of any absolute Truth. As a result, the reader is maneuvered into the extraordinarily uncomfortable position of being made to rely upon verbal and visual signifiers whose authority Blake is in fact calling into question.

An especially interesting point (which is never entirely developed) stems
from Rothenberg's suggestion on page 2 that "the textuality of Jerusalem demands that it be performed with careful attention to the rhetorical status of the enunciations from which it is formed and to the intertextual shifts that it both constructs and thematizes" (2). The crucial word here is "performed." One of the remarkable omissions in Blake scholarship is the absence of sophisticated, extended discussion of the overwhelmingly dramatic, performative aspect of Blake's poetry. Poem after poem presents an array of speakers that makes one think of classical drama on one hand and of oratorios on the other. Blake juxtaposes speeches by his central characters, often presenting them without "tags" to identify the speakers (or supplying them only at the end of the speeches); the reader must pick up on shifts in speaker by recognizing changes in rhetoric, attitude, and point of view. Much of the confusion experienced by Blake's readers—much of what is branded as "inconsistency" or "contradiction"—arises precisely from readers' failure to distinguish correctly among speakers and to appreciate when the speaker has changed.

Rothenberg's explication in Part Two of selected passages from Jerusalem returns, albeit obliquely, to the performative nature of the poem. In her examination of the opening passage from plate 4, for instance, she shrewdly explicates the "disruptions in signification . . . that multiply uncertainties throughout the plate" (69). Who is speaking? she asks, and what or who is Ulro? To whom do the grammatical references in the opening passage point? What is the nature of the "voice" in these lines? What is the status of its authority? And how do we know? These are precisely the sort of questions that reveal the calculated indeterminacies at work in so many of Blake's texts. Blake forces his readers continually to reassess both the information presented in the text (which includes word and image, verbal and visual vocabulary) and the reading activity by which they "process" that information. There is in this respect a significant dimension of play (however serious and meaningful) to Blake's illuminated art. Rothenberg offers us some tantalizing suggestions here, as others have in the past; it remains for someone to provide the really detailed examination the topic requires, perhaps aided by some research into the nature of "live theatre" in Blake's time and the ways in which printed editions of plays were received in those years by a consuming public for whom the very large halls of the Drury Lane and Covent Garden patent theaters provided only two of the many venues in which dramatic works of one sort or another entertained throngs of eager audiences.

"Because all perception involves an occulted act of interpretation, a poem that calls into question a reader's strategies for imposing determinate interpretation could help reeducate that reader into a profoundly different relationship to the world . . . . Blake encourages the reader to confront the ways in which he or she uses . . . contexts (such as the idea of author-as-origin) to create "authoritative" interpretations. In fact, Blake compels the reader to recognize both the necessity for and the artificial and unstable existence of these contexts in the production of any meaning" (48). This passage epitomizes the thrust of Rethinking Blake's Textuality. Though brief, the book raises important questions and is in many ways refreshingly non-authoritative in its procedure. Rothenberg does what she initially says she will do: she presents what seem to her particularly unsettling and therefore stimulating aspects of textuality in Jerusalem and speculates on their origin, their intent, and their
real and potential effects on readers. And she links these speculations with issues that have been ventilated by poststructuralist theorists, asking whether Blake and poststructural theory cast any useful light upon one another. At the end, the author deliberately avoids the definitive and the absolute: we can never entirely escape our enslavement to "the mechanisms and structures of ideological construction," she concludes, but in coming better to understand such construction we may gradually learn to see it for what it is, so that we may better assess our own responses to the purported authority of texts of all sorts (136–37). Rothenberg has asked good questions here, has offered interesting and suggestive answers to many of them, and has passed others along to her own readers (and Blake's, of course) to wrestle with on their own. In the process, she has done a service both to Blake and to his readers—and to hers as well.

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The Mystery to a Solution ostensibly concerns Jorge Luis Borges's rewriting—or doubling—Edgar Allan Poe's three detective tales, but as anyone familiar with Irwin's previous work would guess, this book covers a great deal more ground: Sir Thomas Browne, Lewis Carroll, chess and its implications for psychoanalysis, incest taboos, a variety of Greek myths, number theory, eighteenth-century controversies in mathematics—a glance at the table of contents will affirm that these are only a fraction of the topics he considers. While it would be impossible to identify a single main line of argument, the "simple-minded question" that opens Chapter One resonates throughout The Mystery to a Solution: "How does one write analytic detective fiction as high art when the genre's central narrative mechanism seems to discourage the unlimited reading associated with serious writing?" Four hundred pages of unlimited reading later, Irwin articulates an answer he has been working toward, more or less, all along: that self-consciousness, formulated as the analysis of analytic power, is the central mystery Poe and Borges explore in their detective fiction, and since this mystery is insoluble, the (re)reading—and the detective work—must continue infinitely.

Appropriately, then, insolubility, incommensurability, and infinity play important parts in Irwin's analyses. The oscillation between sameness and difference, even and odd, that Poe and Borges figure into their detective stories and that Irwin traces to a variety of earlier sources represents human self-reflexiveness and self-division. Trying to know oneself requires imagining a part of one's consciousness that can examine the whole of one's consciousness, a concept Irwin explicates through discussions of arithmetical progression, Greek paradoxes, and differential calculus as well as stories such as Borges's "The Aleph" and Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (the "overdetermined D----" stands for, among other things, *difference*). In each case some
incommensurable element or differential keeps an equation, a puzzle, or a mystery from being solved.

Irwin’s analytical path, which deliberately winds and doubles back on itself, leads to flashes of insight more than a sustained, accretive argument. In Chapter 12 he makes brilliant connections between Poe’s “exposure” of Maelzel’s automaton chess player and the detective tales, going beyond the obvious similarities (Poe playing detective in the Maelzel piece) to reveal that both the chess player and Dupin are figurations of self-division and the mind/body problem: Dupin’s superior intellect makes other men seem like predictable automata in comparison, yet in “Rue Morgue,” “the narrator’s description of Dupin’s altered physical appearance as he exercises his analytic skill makes Dupin himself sound like an automaton... It is as if Dupin’s body had suddenly become a physical medium for an alien spirit” (113). In Irwin’s reading, “Rue Morgue” centers on the problem of differentiating the human: like the labyrinths Borges constructs and alludes to, Poe’s story is a puzzle with a half-human beast at the center, a beast that must be overcome in order to prove the protagonist’s superior, non-bestial nature. Irwin also links the locked-room mystery of “Rue Morgue” to labyrinth mythology through Dupin’s explanation of his solution, in which a broken nail in the window “terminated the clew” (i.e. the thread of deduction), a clew fastened to a nail at the entrance being Theseus’s method for solving the labyrinth. But Irwin presses on: “And, of course, the French word for nail, the word Dupin would have used repeatedly, is clou. Which is simply Poe’s way of giving the reader a linguistic clue (hint) that the clew (thread) will ultimately terminate at a clou (nail)—although even the most attentive reader will probably experience this pun as a clue only retrospectively, so that Poe remains one up” (196).

Indeed, trying to be “one up” necessitates keeping an even-and-odd game going, preventing closure or solution—and like the detectives he and Poe created, Borges, in rewriting the Dupin tales, tries to “one up” his literary precursor. (As this analysis calls to mind Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,” Irwin points out that “Bloom has always acknowledged that one of his own major precursors in the theory of influence was Borges” [429].) Irwin makes a strong case that Borges self-consciously matched each of his three detective stories with a specific Poe tale: “Ibn-Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth” with “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Garden of the Forking Paths” with “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” and “Death and the Compass” with “The Purloined Letter.” The last pairing gives rise to one of Irwin’s most interesting and complex arguments, which concerns the meaning of the three/four oscillation in those two stories. The triangular structure of the characters’ relationships to the letter formulated by Lacan (King/Queen/Minister, Police/Minister/Dupin) becomes, with the addition of the narrator, quadrangular, as in Derrida’s reading. Similarly, in “Death and the Compass,” Red Scharlach creates, through a series of murders, a labyrinth for Erik Lonnrot that the police see as a triangle but that Lonnrot sees as a diamond in the making. Although Scharlach kills Lonnrot at the fourth point on the map, only three murders actually take place (one having been faked), mirroring the four-letter series consisting of three different letters in the tetragrammaton (JHVH, YHWH, etc.), the very clue Scharlach uses to bait Lonnrot. Of
course, Borges also mirrors Poe’s triangular pattern of police, criminal, and detective, complete with the psychic doubling of detective and criminal. When Irwin, in the penultimate chapter, conjectures that Lacan got the idea for his “triangular” reading of “The Purloined Letter” from “Death and the Compass,” it comes as almost no surprise, for Borges has emerged in the course of this study not only as an ingenious interpreter of Poe but as a writer who has woven nearly the entire Western literary tradition into his fiction and essays.

Much of the material in The Mystery to a Solution originally appeared in article form, which helps to explain its unpredictable, digressive structure; and yet, that circuitous, “labyrinthine” organization reflects the method of Poe’s and Borges’s detective stories and the process of detection (and perhaps the process of reading) itself. Irwin plays detective for forty-six chapters, speculating about writers’ intentions to the point of trying to reconstruct their decision-making processes, essentially replicating the mind-reading game Dupin plays with Poe’s narrator in “The Purloined Letter.” In this respect, Irwin’s analyses are highly presumptuous—and extremely interesting. He traces linguistic and historical “clues” so that apparent coincidences produce provocative new readings. As a result, his book reads like a detective story: one wonders where a given argument will lead and tries (like the reader of a mystery) to solve the puzzle before the writer/detective explains it.

One conclusion most readers will certainly reach before Irwin acknowledges it in the last chapter is that in the course of his analysis he has “borrowed a dynamic from Borges” (451). I would even argue that Irwin both pays tribute to and doubles Borges in the same way Borges pays tribute to and doubles Poe. Accordingly, readers who grow impatient with Borges’s obscure references to ancient lore, his detached, academic style, and the sense that he may be playing off our own lack of expertise to pull the wool over our eyes will probably grow impatient with Irwin for the same reasons. But those who find Borges’s use of mathematics, puzzles, allusions, and myths fascinating and who admire his ambitious interpretations and seemingly countless “what if” scenarios will find Irwin’s work compelling as well. Like Poe and Borges, Irwin makes a strong case for the primacy of intellect, largely by exhibiting his own curiosity and analytical skill. As his title suggests, though, Irwin opens up the texts he considers rather than declaring any cases closed, and for that reason The Mystery to a Solution should inspire still more re-readings of six analytic detective stories and a great many more works as well.

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A rich and complex book, Laughing Screaming covers a wide range of films, which have in common the fact that relatively few scholars write about them. William Paul’s scholarly yet readable work skillfully demonstrates how the
two genres of films, comedy and horror, supposedly on opposite ends of the spectrum, actually have a great deal more in common than critical neglect. The timeless appeal of these films lies in their ability to "gross out" audiences and offer the type of anarchic, carnivalesque art which has been popular since Aristophanes.

William Paul’s last work, The Comedy of Ernst Lubitsch (Columbia, 1983), was less ambitious and more tightly structured, in large part because of the nature of its subject. What is most praiseworthy about William Paul’s Laughing Screaming—its linking of disparate film types—is also the source of its limitations. If Laughing Screaming has any major flaw, it resides in its episodic quality. It reads more like a series of individual pieces about separate works than treatment of a unified set of films to which the author has applied the same set of questions. Occasionally, I found myself wishing that the author had directed some of his political acumen to films in which his analysis is primarily semiological, or paid more attention to the commercial factors governing film production, which seems to be promised by the introductory chapters. His opening touches on economic factors but then ultimately abandons this important feature of the Animal Movies, whose success rested, in large part, on the popularity of these figures on television’s Saturday Night Live. John Belushi and Bill Murray are popular icons, and the popularity of their films relies on a previous relationship between these figures and the mass audiences. Although the introduction gives a nod to the commercial influence on film, individual chapters rarely mention either box-office popularity or economic considerations that affected the content of these films. At the same time that this inconsistency leaves some gaps, the variety of approaches and treatments also constitutes one of the work’s strong points, for each film demands a slightly different tack.

Paul observes that what he calls Animal Films, such as Animal House, Porky’s, Fast Times at Ridgemont High, etc., consistently undermine the Hollywood tradition of having a strong central figure. In their emphasis on whole herds of animalistic young men, these movies abandon the New Comedy tradition, which has dominated Hollywood throughout much of its history. In the introduction, Paul criticizes flaws in assumptions about Animal Comedy among critics from both left- and right-wing camps; both value art with a "higher" function, whether this is upholding or satirizing conventional values and institutions. Paul emphasizes the power and value of gross-out for its own sake, not because it carries a buried message that is “better,” defined as more socially uplifting or spiritual. He praises the celebration of physicality, advocating a redefinition of "low" in the sense of position in the body, with low comedy serving as a source of inspiration and imagination, without the negative connotation usually associated with the term "low." Likewise, Paul rejects the practice of using “reality principles” as a valid criterion in condemning low comedy, since gross-out films are probably more reflective of human experience than are the supposedly more sophisticated forms of the New Comedy.

Laughing Screaming, as the title suggests, is filled with creative connections between apparently contrasting material, including not only varied subject matter but leaps over time, space, and genre as well. The author makes a strong argument for linking comedy and horror: “The testing of the limits of
behavior is the dominant concern of both the comedies and the horror films, as it is the underlying concern of any attempt that seeks praise for being gross. Implicit in the testing of constraints is a reevaluation of what we mean by 'high' and 'low' in culture, since higher forms, like advanced civilizations for Freud, build on greater constraints" (75). He elucidates connections between juvenile comedy and horror films and the medieval Feast of Fools which "inverted prevailing hierarchies" (76). In another leap over the centuries, he contrasts the eponymous Porky with the figure of the Miles Gloriosus Falstaff in Henry IV (120). The work provides a refreshing slant on film comedy and horror in its focus on connections with classical dramatic and cultural traditions.

Particularly insightful are Paul's analyses of racial tensions inherent in many of the Animal Films. The discussion of Porky's elucidates the relation between sex and power, noting that a similar conflation occurs in an earlier Mel Brooks film and Animal Film precursor, Blazing Saddles. (1974). Brooks plays on the stereotype of the large black penis, using a darkened screen to portray the love scene between Madeline Kahn and Cleavon Little through aural rather than visual depiction (as in Porky's Cherry Forever scene, which is also interracial). Paul accounts for this "discretion" in terms of race, arguing that direct depiction of interracial sexual relations would be "beyond the bounds of then currently acceptable taste" (136). He does not mention the film's other self-conscious reference to white fears of black sexuality, the scene in which Little says to the assembled townspeople, "Let me whip this out," whereupon the whole crowd gasps and shields their eyes as he takes out a letter authorizing him to become sheriff. This incident fits the pattern that Paul recognizes elsewhere: juvenile fascination with viewing forbidden sights and the simultaneous fear of punishment for such voyeurism, which offers a covert Oedipal challenge to patriarchal power.

Paul observes that "both Blazing Saddles and Animal House demonstrate that attitudes on sexuality necessarily connect to issues of power," (137) a subject that receives contrasting treatment depending on the target audience. In a chapter entitled "Outer Limits of the Inner City," Paul carefully delineates distinctions between the animal comedies and horror films aimed at white audiences and those for blacks. While white animal comedies often attempt to pay tribute to black culture, the differences in perspectives of such black focus films as Cooley High and Car Wash are striking. In white films, there is a supplanting of power figures by those initiated into the power structure, whereas in black films characters demonstrate a much greater consciousness of economic limitations. Car Wash, in "overturning all normal markers of status in conventional Hollywood movies, . . . points to an egalitarian impulse that is both more conscious and perhaps more radical than later Animal Comedy" (148). The treatment of the homosexual motif is likewise more revolutionary, in giving this character some of the film's best lines. I would question Paul's analysis of the lines, "What makes you so special?" (150) and the response, "Cause I'm the one nigger here who doesn't get wet around here." Paul interprets the use of the term "nigger" as a sign of self-loathing, whereas Henry Louis Gates in The Signifying Monkey states that at times this term indicates admiration for superior status or cleverness.

Paul points out that black comedies are more likely to view the power
structure itself as suspect, with little chance of eventual initiation into authority positions. White animal films, on the other hand, often end with an epilogue that shows the eventual fate of the characters, many of whom ascend to power, replacing those figures they battled against throughout the course of the film. Paul notes that many of these films, which have sex as their nominal subject, are really not about sex at all, but about power. John Belushi, one of the more important and powerful figures in Animal House, is never shown having physical sexual contact with a woman, and it is only in the epilogue that the audience learns that he eventually marries one of the sorority girls.

While Paul discusses the epilogue in some detail, he glosses over an element mentioned at the end of Animal House, the note that character “Greg Marmalard” was a “Nixon White House Aide / Raped in Prison 1974.” This hesitation to explore homosexual subtexts in animal movies pervades his analysis, for although he acknowledges homosexual references where they are unavoidable, he often passes them off as minor details, not likely to be of interest to the largely mainstream audiences who view such films. The homosexual subtext in the scene in M*A*S*H* in which the other soldiers stare at the oversized penis of Painless Potter also receives only a glancing mention, but Paul analyzes in some detail the psychological implications of the statement, “I’d like to see it angry.” In a similar vein, Paul discusses the obsession with penis size, jokes about erections, and the Porky’s simulated sex scene with Cherry Forever in heterosexual psychoanalytic terms. He rightly connects this scene with Oedipal fears of punishment for desiring the mother, but he does not address the homoerotic subtext: the bonding which occurs among the young males waiting together, growing more and more aroused as they listen to cries of passion out of their sight. Paul mentions but generally avoids exploration of homosexual and misogynist elements of animal movies in Bachelor Party, in the crossdressing scene particularly (94).

Paul notes the absence of females or their irrelevance to the plot in M*A*S*H* and Animal House, and observes, quite rightly, that Fast Times at Ridgemont High, directed by Amy Heckerling, is a notable exception to this trend toward exclusion of the female point of view. In the chapter “Sexual Politics,” Paul conducts a deft genre analysis, noting the greater sophistication and insight in Amy Heckerling’s film version of Fast Times at Ridgemont High, as opposed to Cameron Crowe’s true-life account of his return to high school. This is one of his strongest chapters with its shot-by-shot structural and semiological interpretation of the sex scene between Stacy and Ron. Paul points out that, unlike the other Animal Movies, Fast Times presents a detailed treatment of actual intercourse, with none of the fantasy ease and satisfaction of the novel’s rendition. The film celebrates the playful anarchy teenagers create in the midst of comfort in a middle class white world, with little reference to poverty or racial issues. The character who embodies the appeal of regression is Spicoli (Sean Penn), whose childlike delight blossoms forth in the final scene, in which he accidentally distracts a robber just long enough to allow the clerk to throw hot coffee on the robber and take his gun. Paul points out how Spicoli’s words, “Awesome! Totally awesome!” and his position as passive viewer of this transfer of power, echo the position of the viewer, who can appreciate how the film presents the “appeal of regression at the same time it looks to the comparable demands of maturity” (205).
In both this chapter and the subsequent ones, "Politics of the Image" and "Power Without Politics," Paul uses a rather narrow definition of the term "politics," referring to the internal notions of hierarchy and authority inherent in the world of the film. This is in distinct contrast to his clever linking of the screen persona of Bill Murray to real-life political figures and beliefs in his chapter on "Bill Murray, Anarchic Conservative." Paul demonstrates how his persona and the structure of his films ultimately reinforce an existing power structure. He goes on to make comparisons between Murray's ambiguous speech from *Stripes* (162) and the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, as well as the difficulty of locating the real person behind the persona, applying Christopher Lasch's analysis of the national psyche to connect film heroes and national political consciousness. Other recent works which accomplish this linkage include Susan Jeffords's *Hard Bodies* (Harvard, 1993), Jon Lewis's *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (Routledge, 1993), Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (Routledge, 1993), and Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (Routledge, 1993).

This kind of analysis would have been useful in Paul's chapter on *Revenge of the Nerds*, particularly in light of the American anti-intellectual tradition, which *Nerds* undermines. This chapter might have also benefitted from some materialist criticism of the self-referential link between the film and the media industry, which values and prizes technical expertise, thus accounting for the lionizing of "nerd" values. Film often privileges the mediated experience, creating a kind of self-advertisement much more subtle than the product placement that is prevalent in films aimed at youthful consumers. As with the chapter on *Fast Times*, Paul is at his best in the tight semiological analysis of scenes, in which he discusses almost frame by frame the mise-en-scene and montage that create meaning.

The fourth section, "The Case for Child Abuse," contains chapters analyzing the relationship between modern horror films and child figures. Paul argues that gross-out and children are usually linked in such films, which audiences "find pleasure in . . . precisely because they are disgusting" (314). At the same time that audiences revel in the messes created by the evil child, the author finds that "the need to punish these children is a dominant motif" (318). He convincingly connects this child abuse and destruction with such disparate issues as birth control, abortion, sexual freedom, and the popularity of dead-baby jokes. As with comedy, subversion of hierarchy in horror films provides a perverse titillation and satisfaction, in this case, confronting fears by creating a dystopian blood bath. Women and children provide the most disturbing cases of inversion, with the lower, blood-stained and filthy parts dominating over the higher functions. It is no accident that such tales as *Dracula*, *The Exorcist*, and *Night of the Living Dead* feature dismemberment or separation of the head from the offending lower parts: "Severing the head, the home of the spirit, from the body, the repository of impure desire, will ensure a resurrection of purity" (258). If older horror films demanded restoration of order, the new horror of the seventies, such as *Carrie* or *Nightmare on Elm Street*, created an open-ended horror, in which the monster is never finally destroyed, normal boundaries never reestablished. Paul claims that this lack of closure is not calculated simply to set up possibilities for a sequel: "Rather, as the body lost its sense of boundaries in this period, so did the..."
bodies of narrative. . . In its search for the final thrill, the horror film began
to take on a kind of comic rhythm, moving toward a last scream that paral­lels the last laugh of comedy” (405).

In the closing chapter, Paul notes that the mass popularity of gross-out in
horror and comedy became a historical phenomenon, shrinking to its core
audience in the late 80s. He concludes with a statement of his appreciation
for the rawness of these films, for their ability to express the zeitgeist of a pe­riod of ambivalence and disturbance. The author praises Fast Time at Ridge­mont High, Revenge of the Nerds, Heaven Help Us, The Other, The Shining, Alien, and The Brood for exemplifying “the most powerful expressions of a period that was itself defined by fissures and disruptions” (430). Paul creates
in this work another important justification for studying such films, beyond
the usual rationales provided by most critics of popular culture and mass en­tertainment, and he does so in a scholarly yet entertaining way.

The style of Laughing Screaming is clear and crisp, avoiding the jargon as­sociated with criticism that tackles issues of cultural criticism and film in sim­ilar depth. While Paul brings in Bahktin and Freud, his analysis is not a slave
to any theoretical framework. Albeit highly readable, occasional references to
the organization of the book prove somewhat distracting at times, with sign­posts as to where similar topics or titles have been covered or will be cov­ered. Such references call attention to themselves and away from the poten­tially racy content, which is generally quite gripping. Furthermore, Paul is
not particularly playful in his treatment, so don’t expect to do much laughing
or screaming while you read this work. Do expect to be intellectually chal­lenged, enlightened, and entertained by a wide-ranging and insightful analy­sis of a set of films that deserves to be viewed as more than a collection of mere guilty pleasures.

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Does life exist in academic texts? In Conspiring With Forms, Terry Caesar
examines modes of academic discourse that are customarily overlooked in
most commentaries on academic writing: letters of recommendation, the doc­toral dissertation, and acknowledgements, to name but a few, and discovers
that their life support systems have long been disconnected.

What Caesar does discover, as the title suggests, is that academic writing
has become strangled by the constraints of “form.” He painstakingly unravels
the many manifestations of “form” and attempts to locate its place of author­ity whereby it dictates not only the shape of academic discourse, but to a
large extent, the shape of the academy itself. And this is where the real nar­rative can be found. Caesar confides to the reader that he is less concerned
with studying the profession “than its confidential, but far from confident, textualization of itself,” and it is within this collection of essays that he sub­stantiates his allegations regarding institutional self-inscription. As a member
of the profession he is studying, Caesar readily acknowledges at the outset that in writing these essays, he discovered that he was writing about himself. The point, which he makes most plain, is that "having one's own voice is what each of these essays is about."

Maybe so, but somehow that claim turns out to be less a demand for having one's own voice and more a disclosure of the risks that are associated with actually using that voice, particularly if one is white, male, and heterosexual. In the essay, "Being a White Male," he specifically maps out the dilemma of the white male's attempting to locate himself in the environs of a contemporary academic no-man's land, within "a competition of victimization." Caesar laments, "insofar as he can't represent himself with his own voice, has anecdotal authority only, and in the most intellectually sophisticated and politically progressive areas of American life must silently endure ideological imperatives, this man is in fact curiously like what a woman is in prefeminist masculinist discourse."

Although the essay tries very hard to generate sympathy for the predicament of the white male, Caesar admits that the locus of power still resides among white males. Pointing out that "everyone knows what a white male is, and nobody wants to be one," Caesar adds, "maleness is simply not interesting." Moreover, if he attempts to locate himself within the profession, he finds himself somewhere removed from the center, faced with reaching some sort of resolution of the fate that "a man is what a woman says he is," and "certainly the worst thing about being a white male today is that one finds himself more or less a purely consensualized being . . . no self at all if somebody doesn't speak for you." Somehow these issues just don't achieve the level of general concern that Caesar feels they should. One senses that perhaps there is something else that has precipitated his ire. And then it emerges, the statement that "gender pays off." This is the point at which the real issue of the essay becomes clear.

Yet, although this essay may well be the weakest in the collection, it often succeeds in pointing out the often futile attempts to locate one's self in the profession. This, along with each of Caesar's other essays, speaks of the academic text as a narrative about placement of the subject: of getting in and getting out, of being inside and being outside, of absence and of presence. He explains, "I account for my own displacement by working through a series of discursive instances that each situates how I am to be myself displaced as subject." It is in this way that Caesar meticulously maps out the landscape whereby one's presence—and one's absence—are contingent upon validation by the profession. He then examines one by one the means by which this validation is exercised.

The first chapter, "Absence in Letters of Recommendation," presents Caesar's initial effort to work through his sense of displacement. He suggests that "the text of recommendation is grounded upon the myth of presence: it is about a person, and it will produce a person." Yet it is not so much the person that it produces; instead what is produced is a segmented body of interchangeable parts consisting of qualities of mind, behavior, and character. Only the reader of the text has the power to re-assemble the subject in whatever order of priority he or she prefers. Thus, as Caesar very astutely observes, the "text of recommendation [may] aspire to a position of impossible presence, wherein
the words of another are converted into one’s own, and then one’s own words are made equivalent into one’s body.” Or, as it appears, the subject him- or herself adapts to the form that the narrative assumes.

One of the chapters to specifically address this subject is “Lack of Application,” in which Caesar considers application letters along similar lines as letters of recommendation, referring to them as “text[s] of absence—or failed presence.” In comparing the two, he claims that “in the letter of application you have to write your own absence yourself.” He goes on, “Applying is a comedy, and the lovely thrust . . . is that you apply to someone in order to invite that person to conspire with you to attest to your absence.”

But there is another absence to which Caesar speaks repeatedly throughout his text, one which he evidently has been obliged to encounter, and to which he reveals to have been most sensitive, and it is in this chapter where it initially surfaces. As he describes, “What I find interesting about my sense of a career is that at the center of it . . . is an absence: no book.” This is one of the first hints that the subtext that follows through the remaining essays is an allegory of professional victimization. He continues along similar lines, claiming that “to write a letter of application is always to be found wanting on some basis. (To use that of a book: if one, why not two, or why with this publisher rather than that, and why not more recent. And so on.)” But if not having written a book hints at an externally inflicted, internally nurtured sense of inferiority, then the fact that an entire chapter devoted to “On Not Writing a Dissertation” can be read as a lament about the psychic cost of not completing the final step of the PhD process.

Throughout Conspiring With Forms, Caesar makes a convincing case that the academy is one of the most immovable institutions in our culture with respect to its insistence on protocol. By choosing to frame his observations within a quasi-autobiographical style, he repeatedly presents himself as someone outside the conspiracy of academic forms. Yet, despite the renegade status he assumes throughout the text—specifically, citing his refusal to write a dissertation (although in the chapter “On Not Writing a Dissertation” he reveals almost grudgingly that many years after having abandoned the effort, he actually did produce one)—nevertheless, he has apparently met with a fairly reasonable degree of success in his profession. He writes: “The great thing is to go through the motions. A dissertation exists as something to have done.” The dissertation as a piece of writing presents itself as merely another hurdle to clear in order to attain some sort of recognized professional legitimacy.

But even after having written a dissertation and even after having produced a book, there are still borders to be crossed, if one is able, or one is permitted. Caesar represents borders and boundaries not only as things to be traversed, but also as a means of inclusion and exclusion. It is in the pursuit of this analogy that Conspiring With Forms is the most successful, and at the same time is the most disquieting, especially in its final chapter, “Teaching at a Second-Rate University.” It is here that Caesar presents his most damning evidence that the most crucial factor of professional academic significance relies upon the importance of institutional place. One who has not yet attained the status of a “name” in the profession can be accorded presence only when and if affiliated with an institution of the first magnitude. Or, as Caesar
states, "Ultimately teaching at a second-rate university is to acknowledge a ceaseless condition of structural exclusion from any decision about what can and cannot be said. . . . It’s to be deprived of integrity." Moreover, if one should have the misfortune to begin one's career with a second-rate (or worse) institution, there is a risk of falling victim to the maxim that Caesar uses to illustrate his point: "everything rises that deserves to rise, because if it hasn’t risen, it hasn’t deserved to." Or, to put it another way, “we may not know who [the man] is (we may not want to know), but we know what Bates [a second-rate institution, per Caesar] is.”

The issues that Terry Caesar brings forth in Conspiring With Forms are especially timely given the dearth of new faculty positions nationwide, and particularly in the premier institutions. The fact is that most of the top new PhD crop will be extremely fortunate to find jobs in even the second-rate institutions. Those who formerly enjoyed the status of the student elite will fall victim to the choice of either “settling” for a job at a less-than-top university, or remaining under- or unemployed. I suspect, however, that many who are asked to sympathize with Caesar’s claims of victimization will take careful note of the fact that he was hired, promoted, and given tenure without completing a dissertation or publishing a book. These individuals, many of whom might be among the new or recent PhD’s, could fail to agree with Caesar’s assessment of his own academic predicament, seeing instead as the real victims of the conspiracy of form, today’s new academics, those for whom career paths of academicians such as Caesar are no longer viable prospects.

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