

# *Euphemisms, Efficiencies, Interdisciplines*

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Karen Bassi

**A**S THE OPERATIVE TERM FOR THIS VOLUME, “restructuring” assumes the existence of a prior structure. It raises the question of what that structure is or was and requires an exploration of the reasons for and effects of that structure’s proposed or desired revision. The term implies that a wholesale overthrow of the prior structure is not on the table, but rather some recognizable and defensible changes. But defensible according to what criteria or measurements? If “restructuring” is a euphemism, what bitter pill is it making us swallow? To be somewhat reductive, is the restructuring of humanities departments simply another name for “efficiencies,” measured both in money and in faculty, staff, and student labor? If the first aim is pragmatic, what is the second? And in what sense are they mutually reinforcing? Has money been saved and have efficiencies been realized? Can and should a university be “efficient,” and if so, how does one calculate what this means? In short, what is the relationship between the labor of the faculty, staff, and students and the call for financial “prudence” (the term of choice among university administrators)?

At my institution (the University of California at Santa Cruz), the restructuring of the humanities has meant two things: the dissolution of the Department of American Studies and

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the amalgamation and reduction of staff as a result. Faculty in the Department of American Studies have been reassigned to other departments, my own included. As I understand our current dean's vision of the future of the Humanities Division (this restructuring has been taking place under two deans), the division will offer a number of programs, one of which will focus, for example, on ethnicities and critical race theory, that is, the kind of teaching and research for which American Studies faculty are known. Does it make sense to "disestablish" a department, on the basis of the argument that it did not have sufficient faculty numbers, only to resurrect its research and teaching under the rubric of a divisional major whose faculty are dispersed among other existing departments? And how will these "interdisciplinary" divisional majors be governed, staffed, and supported outside the departmental structure?

I use the word "interdisciplinary" here—I'll have more to say about it below—in a structural sense to refer to curricula that require faculty from different departments and divisions to plan and administer the program and to teach its courses. For several years I directed one of these programs at Santa Cruz. Classics is an undergraduate major that is administratively housed in the Department of History but that depends upon courses from faculty in six departments and two divisions. As is only obvious, the challenges connected with this kind of endeavor are financial and structural with an emphasis on faculty labor: curricular management (leave planning), governance, the funding of "extracurricular" events (colloquia, etc.), and student advising fall principally to faculty who also have teaching and service obligations in their "home" departments. The institution has not caught up with this "structure," and it is not surprising that this is to its own benefit insofar as the additional work required of the faculty is underrecognized in the personnel process and uncompensated. In saying so, I do not mean to imply that this is not important work or that I don't intend to keep doing it. My point is that if the "restructuring" of the humanities means the replacement of academic departments with less-structured programs, the potential for increased and uncompensated faculty labor has to be addressed.

In addition to directing the Classics Program, I served as chair of the Department of Literature at UCSC from 2008 to 2012. The structure of the department is unusual insofar as it includes faculty whose teaching and research areas are subsumed by both the more standard and the more narrowly focused literature departments (i.e., English, American, Greek and Latin, German, French, and Italian). The undergraduate major is divided into five broad concentrations (National/Transnational Literatures; Creative Writing; Modern Literary Studies; Pre- and Early-Modern Studies; and World Literature and Cultural Studies) and is one of the largest undergraduate majors on the campus. The graduate program (MA and PhD) focuses on five broad areas of teaching and research: Technologies of Narrative; Trans-/Post-/Emergent Nationalisms; Poetics, Poetry, and Experimental Writing; Materialism and Material Culture; and Critical Theories.

We have a language requirement at both the graduate and the undergraduate level and recently instituted a required course in the theory and practice of translation. I mention these specific curricular details in order to emphasize that while this combinatory structure may seem unwieldy or hard to govern, it is in fact the basis for intellectual and programmatic flexibility. I also want to suggest that in a time of institutional restructuring, such flexibility is vital for the future of the humanities, and in fact, it resists the restructuring impulse. Of course, it also requires greater collaboration among a diverse group of faculty and a greater commitment to shared theoretical orientations than does the conventional "coverage" model in literary studies.

But the slipperiest slope, in my opinion, is the extent to which restructuring is a means of shrinking the faculty while student numbers are flat or increasing. This slope slides both ways: for while this shrinkage is the putative “cause” of restructuring (there are too few faculty in a given department to ensure stability—they call this “critical mass”), it is more accurately its intended effect. This effect, moreover, necessarily positions faculty members further and further from the students they teach, either by means of technological media (“distance” learning) or by means of larger class sizes, or both. Under both scenarios, the faculty become a receding or virtual presence. And this is happening at the same time that academic institutions—and I am speaking primarily of public universities—depend more and more on private funding. The irony is that this “virtualizing” of the faculty is at odds with this greater dependence on outside or private funding. For in the humanities, to a much greater degree than in the natural or biological sciences, private money comes primarily from alumni who had a memorable intellectual experience, which is not to be confused with an educational experience, in the classroom. What, in short, is the relationship between restructuring and teaching? Or, to be more blunt, are we to infer that “efficiency” is a criterion for good teaching?

In a posting in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on February 19, 2010, titled “Economizing on the Humanities?” Princeton’s Stan Katz comments on the restructuring of graduate programs at the University of Iowa. Of the fourteen programs receiving the lowest rankings by a faculty committee and therefore “most at risk of elimination or restructuring,” six are in the humanities: American Studies, Asian Civilizations, Comparative Literature, Film Studies, German, and Linguistics. According to Katz:

The criteria for the lowest category included “incongruent mission,” problems in admissions, “program outcomes” such as time to degree, and “program characteristics, such as program size, comparison with other programs, centrality to the University, and plans for the program’s future.” That last criterion includes some completely subjective parameters, of course. The “Additional Evaluation” category comments that its programs “may be candidates for restructuring and/or merging with other related programs. Some programs in this category may become candidates for closure.”

Katz speculates about the criteria used for evaluating these programs (time to degree, etc.) but does not address directly the impetus behind the reconstructive initiative in the first place; the word “efficiency” comes into the posting as something of a naturalized criterion:

The bottom line is the question of the extent to which the specification of efficiency as the rule of choice in academic decisions may be in conflict with Iowa’s overall educational mission and responsibility. Shouldn’t programs also be assessed in terms of the broader educational mission of the University?

Well, yes. But isn’t this question close to tautological? Or rather, doesn’t it simply beg the question of the “broader educational mission of the University”? I note too that “mission statements” and statements about a department’s “educational goals” are another symptom of this new funding climate. Administrators ask the faculty to supply these “statements” as sound bites for potential donors. In themselves, I suppose, such statements are not without some merit. But they are also necessarily reductive. We should also think about the fact that the downsizing of faculty and

departments is the fertile ground within which such sound bites are believed to speak the loudest, at least to donors.

Katz also wonders whether “eliminating or reducing activity in [certain] fields will not have spillover effects on other departments, on cross-disciplinary work and on undergraduate education generally?” Similar to the practice of libraries sending books that have not been read in the last five years to the Northern Regional Library Facility, the elimination or reduction of fields, departments, or both as an effect of restructuring will necessarily inhibit the kind of serendipitous scholarship and teaching that can be analogized with searching the stacks. The “search” function in electronic databases, which is nothing if not efficient, does not have the same serendipitous potential. In my field, for example, the former has led to articles that track the use of specific lexical items in particular authors; such work can be informative, but it is not the kind of scholarship that moves the discipline forward.

On April 12, 2011, the dean of the Humanities Division at UCSC forwarded the following announcement to me as chair of the Department of Literature:

The National Humanities Alliance is working with the Association of American Universities and Association of Public and Land-grant Universities to gather examples of humanities research and education grants, primarily federally funded, that have produced direct or indirect benefits for society. This project is part of our continuing effort to articulate the value of the humanities, as well as our immediate need to respond to proposed spending cuts by Congress and the Administration to the National Endowment for the Humanities and other federal funding for humanities education and research in Fiscal Years 2011 and 2012.

The request for “examples of humanities research and education grants, primarily federally funded, that have produced direct or indirect benefits for society” raises two questions: “What counts as direct or indirect benefits?” and “What constitutes a society?” These two terms are mutually enforcing, of course. That is, those who constitute a society might be defined as such by their common understanding of what counts as a benefit. The implication that humanities professors are able to confer such benefits on society only through “federally funded” grants is, of course, a symptom of the cost-benefit analysis.

In *The Marketplace of Ideas*, Louis Menand notes that the value of physics departments is understood by society, even though much of society does not understand what physics professors do: “People feel, out of ignorance or not, that there is a good return on investment in physics departments. In the 1980’s, people began wondering what the return on investment was in the humanities.” The focus of this chapter, titled “The Humanities Revolution” is to discover why the “lack of a paradigm [in humanities disciplines] seem[s] something like a crisis.” Tracing the emergence of the American research university and its constituent disciplines since the end of World War II, Menand notes:

Fields of inquiry become formalized and institutionalized by drawing borders that differentiate them from other fields. The university is, in this sense, a semiotic system: a discipline defines itself in relation to all the disciplines it is not. The study of literature is not the study of philosophy or sociology or history; it stands on its own intellectual foundations. But the more

rigidly a discipline's borders are enforced and the more autonomy it claims, the more vulnerable it is to subversion.<sup>1</sup>

Deconstruction, feminism, queer theory, cultural studies, and Marxist criticism are the proof of this vulnerability. Whether these approaches are “antidisciplinary,” as Menand suggests, is open to debate because, although it is true that the disciplines have historically been the inventions and preserves of white males of privilege, they have adapted over the long haul. The question raised here has to do with the extent to which disciplines are or must be coextensive with academic departments; we return, in other words, to the question of restructuring. If disciplines can tolerate change, can departments be far behind? Of course, departments can exist only as long as students take *their* courses instead of courses in other departments; this is the practical effect of the semiotic system to which Menand refers. But while this fact speaks to the clerical utility of the departmental structure, it does not necessarily work against what Menand calls “paradigm loss,” that is, the shifting of intellectual objects and approaches within *disciplines*. If paradigm loss is in the genetic code of humanities disciplines, then what are the intellectual and pedagogical rationales for restructuring departments?

I also wonder about the extent to which “restructuring” humanities departments names a failed resistance to homogeneity. In other words, might it be seen within the institution and “society” at large as an admission that teaching and research in the humanities are all of a piece or, as far as administrators and those outside the humanities are concerned, we all do pretty much the same thing? Here the amalgamation or elimination of programs and departments and the reduction or redistribution of faculty undermine the specificity of source materials, historical contexts, and methodologies that distinguish academic disciplines in the humanities, even as we applaud their capacity for paradigm loss. One symptom of this failed resistance may be the current trend among major academic presses toward more and more “companions” and “encyclopedias” of literary works and approaches. In the most recent (at the time of writing) literature catalog from Routledge, for example, “Handbooks,” “Readers,” “The Basics,” “Introductions to . . .,” “Guides to . . .,” “Companions to . . .,” and “Encyclopedias” far outpace literary monographs and editions of primary texts. What does this mean for the discipline of literature and for the teaching of literature within a departmental structure? More pointedly, is this trend somehow aligned with arguments in favor of restructuring? I do not doubt the usefulness of these kinds of texts for teaching. But insofar as they make claims to a comprehensive “state of the field,” might they inhibit the kind of research that fosters the shifting or “losing” of paradigms that disciplines, if not departments, have the potential to foster?

In a special 2009 issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled “The Fate of the Disciplines,” François Hartog has an article entitled “The Double Fate of the Classics.” Speculating on the particular fate of classics as a discipline that has had to resist sedimentation and traditionalism while also resisting “presentism,” he concludes:

The fate of the disciplines, the classics like the others, depends on our capacity to convince society, even more so if its only horizon is the present, to have places where the point is not to forget the present but to manage to look at it as if from a distance in order to better understand it. This is neither a question of forming cloisters to forget the world outside nor of establishing

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 62, 81.

conservatories to preserve the past through an attachment wrought with nostalgia but rather of creating spaces of estrangement and being inventive producers of untimely reflection. Freeing oneself from the present is the precondition for interrogating other relationships to time and to the very figures (the ancients and classics, in this instance) that have been heavily invested in as the means to decenter, to open up possibilities, and to choose new relations to link experience with the horizon of expectation, that is, to weave the past, the present, and the future otherwise.<sup>2</sup>

Here Hartog makes a case for the capacity of disciplines (even the most traditional of disciplines, i.e., classics) to be the necessary bases of their own undoing.

Which brings me to the second part of my essay, that is, to the relationship between interdisciplinarity and restructuring, beginning with some basic questions: Does interdisciplinarity achieve the goal/end of revealing, denouncing, and/or disabling the power structures of disciplines, or is it simply a screen on which we project our own inertia in the face of those structures? Is interdisciplinarity a symptom of the faculty's collective lack of will in the face of market forces and the so-called corporatization of the university, where the related and operative term is "partnering"? And, finally, is interdisciplinarity an effect of the declining domination of the Western and American university system?

Interdisciplinarity has both centripetal and centrifugal forms, of course, the latter exemplified by "studies" departments or programs in which, depending on the institutional setup, curricula are taught for the most part by scholars with degrees in the conventionally recognized disciplines (politics, anthropology, American literature, etc.), but in the service of reconceptualizing their "subjects," in a double sense. In this context, the rise of interdisciplinarity can be correlated with the extent to which the number of academic disciplines has proliferated since the medieval trivium and—more dramatically—since the post-Enlightenment secularization of the academy. The result of this proliferation is a history of academic departments or faculties and the aptly named Divisions, built on recurring struggles or "conflicts" within the institution, from its inception.<sup>3</sup>

The source and stakes of this struggle are the subject of Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties* (*Der Streit der Falkultäten*), published in 1798 as a response to state censorship of his writings and the royal edict of 1794 in which Friedrich Wilhelm II had accused Kant of acting "irresponsibly in his duty as a teacher of youth."<sup>4</sup> The starting point of the work is the foundation of the university. And the conflict in the title (*der Streit*) is between the "higher" faculties (theology, medicine, and law) and the "lower" faculty (philosophy). This seemingly inverted hierarchy is explained by the fact that the former faculties are closer to government or state power and that, as Kant remarks with no little irony, I think, "a traditional hierarchy holds that power should be

<sup>2</sup> François Hartog, "The Double Fate of the Classics," in "The Fate of the Disciplines," special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 978–79.

<sup>3</sup> We might see the current interdisciplinary impetus as simply a natural or evolutionary moment within this history. But history is perhaps the least natural of literary forms, one in which genealogy (Hesiod's *Theogony*) eventually becomes etiology (Thucydides's *History*) or in which religion concedes to reason.

<sup>4</sup> Kant includes the edict in the preface to *Der Streit der Falkultäten*. See *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), 11. Page numbers for subsequent citations of this source will be given in the text.

higher than non-power” (23). Thus, philosophy is the “lower” faculty in the sense that it is less subject to state authority and “may use its own judgment about what it teaches” (26). He goes on to explain why:

It is absolutely essential that the learned community at the university also contain a faculty that is independent of the government’s command with regard to its teachings; one that, having no commands to give, is free to evaluate everything, and concerns itself with the interests of the sciences, that is, with truth; one in which reason is authorized to speak out publicly. For without a faculty of this kind, the truth would not come to light (and this would be to the government’s own detriment); but reason is by its nature free and admits of no command to hold something as true (no imperative “Believe!” but only a free “I believe.”). (27–29)

This statement inaugurates the modern discourse of academic freedom. The higher and lower faculties in Kant’s university, in a political climate in which government ministers aim to “stamp out the Enlightenment,” are “at odds” (*im Streit*). It isn’t the particular historical details of this condition that interest me here, however. Nor is my aim to rehabilitate or remythologize the Enlightenment project. Rather, I would like to think about how *The Conflict of the Faculties* (Kant also uses the term “department” to refer to a faculty) can contribute to our discussion of interdisciplinarity and restructuring in the modern university.<sup>5</sup>

Kant begins by noting that the organization of the university and its division into “ranks and classes” are not by chance but according to a priori principles; that is, they are founded on reason (31). But while this organization is principally constituted by the two faculties (higher and lower), it necessarily has a political function or, more specifically, a moral function in the public sphere. Too briefly stated, the job of the philosophy faculty in Kant’s university is to determine the moral basis of organized religion and to put it to the test of reason.<sup>6</sup> The job of the theology faculty is to determine the efficacy of religion as constituted in the Bible and as a consequence of historical and philological investigation. The conflict between the two is thus inevitable to the extent that the higher faculty (theology), by virtue of its relationship to the state, can exercise power over the lower; the danger is that empiricism will trample reason; Kant warns against “mixing one science with another” (13) and insists on a “respectful distance” between them (35). According to Kant then, interdisciplinarity, somewhat anachronistically defined here as the mixing of the higher and the lower faculties, is “against reason.”

But we should not lose sight of the political basis of this conclusion or, more specifically, of its genesis as a response to government censorship. We have seen that the monarch’s justification for censorship is Kant’s position as an instructor of youth. The argument for the autonomy of the philosophy faculty is thus not only about the relationship of the faculties as a closed system but also about the relationship of the faculties to the public; it is also predicated on the fact that the public is incapable of understanding the kind of intellectual work the philosophy faculty does.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the work of the lower faculty is not public knowledge but is mediated by

<sup>5</sup> “But a department [*das Departement*] of this kind, too, must be established at a university; in other words, a university must have a faculty of philosophy” (*ibid.*, 45).

<sup>6</sup> “Now the power to judge autonomously—that is, freely (according to principles of thought in general)—is called reason. So the philosophy faculty, because it must answer for the truth of the teachings it is to adopt or even allow, must be conceived as free and subject only to laws given by reason, not by the government” (*ibid.*, 43).

<sup>7</sup> “The faculties, on the other hand, put their objections and doubts only to one another, as scholars, and the people pay no attention to such matters in a practical way, even if they should hear of them; for, agreeing that

another tier or class of intellectual workers in the wider orbit of Kant's university. These are the people he calls the "businessmen or technicians of learning" (*Geschäftleute oder Werkkundige der Gelehrsamkeit*):

As tools [*Werkzeuge*] of the government (clergymen, magistrates, and physicians), they have legal influence on the public and form a special class [*Klasse*] of the intelligentsia, who are not free to make public use of their learning as they see fit, but are subject to the censorship of the faculties. So the government must keep them under strict control, to prevent them from trying to exercise judicial power, which belongs to the faculties; for they deal directly with the people, who are incompetent [*aus Idioten besteht*] (like the clergyman in relation to the layman), and share in the executive, though certainly not the legislative, power in their field. (25)

These middlemen occupy an important position in what Kant argues is the *inevitable* conflict between the faculties (53). As the purveyors of influence, they are the source of potential governmental pressure on the lower faculty in particular, since the lower faculty "has the title but also the duty, if not to state the whole truth in public, at least to see to it that everything put forward in public as a principle is true" (53). The inevitability of the conflict, in other words, is due to the fact that the higher faculties are closer to governmental power and, as Kant maintains, "will never give up their desire to rule" (55). To summarize then, the conflict of the faculties in Kant's university is the necessary means of keeping "the businessmen and technicians of learning" outside the university. When Kant concludes that "this conflict cannot and should not be settled by an amicable accommodation [*amicabilis compositio*]," we are invited to ask whether interdisciplinarity, both as a concept and as a practice, constitutes a form of the accommodation he warns against.<sup>8</sup> In other words, could it be a form of consolidation or homogenization or reorganization in the service of greater bureaucratic control and budgetary exigencies?

Jacques Derrida's 1980 essay "Mochlos; or, the Conflict of the Faculties" brings this question closer to home.<sup>9</sup> Setting himself the task of recognizing "what no longer reaches us and remains outside the usage of our era"<sup>10</sup> in Kant's work, Derrida extends this temporal contingency to the spatial contingencies that define Kant's university, not only lower and higher but also right and left and, prior to these, inside and outside. It is this last category that, as we have seen, maintains the prerogatives of the higher and lower faculties in Kant's university and leads to Derrida's consideration of his "businessmen or technicians of learning":

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these subtleties are not their affair, they feel obliged to be content with what the government officials, appointed for this purpose, announce to them. . . . The people want to be *led*, that is (as demagogues say), they want to be *duped*. But they want to be led not by the scholars of the faculties (whose wisdom is too high for them), but by the businessmen of the faculties . . . who understand a botched job (*savoir faire*) and have the people's confidence" (*ibid.*, 47–51).

<sup>8</sup> "This conflict cannot and should not be settled by an amicable accommodation [*amicabilis compositio*], but (as a lawsuit) calls for a verdict, that is, the decision of a judge (reason) which has the force of law. For the dispute could be settled only through dishonesty, by [the lower faculty's] concealing the cause of the dissension and letting itself be persuaded; but a maxim of this kind is directly opposed to the spirit of a philosophy faculty, which has the public presentation of truth as its function. . . . This conflict can never end, and it is the philosophy faculty that must always be prepared to keep it going" (*ibid.*, 55).

<sup>9</sup> This essay was delivered on the occasion of the centennial of the Graduate School of Columbia University.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Mochlos; or, the Conflict of the Faculties," in *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 12. Page numbers for subsequent citations of this source will be given in the text.

Kant, then, wanted to make a line of demarcation pass between thinkers in the university and businessmen of knowledge or agents of government power, between the inside and the outside closest to the university. But this line, Kant certainly has to recognize, not only passes along the border and around the institution. It traverses the faculties, and this is a place of conflict, of an unavoidable conflict. (23)

Derrida then goes on to posit the condition of the modern university in the form of a rhetorical question to be answered in the affirmative: “Is it not, nowadays, for reasons involving the structure of knowledge, especially impossible to distinguish rigorously between scholars and technicians of science, just as it is to trace, between knowledge and power, the limit within whose shelter Kant sought to preserve the university edifice?” (16). The expectation of a prescribed answer to this question may be said to illustrate the lost distinction between the language of truth (inside Kant’s university) and the language of action (outside Kant’s university), or between knowledge and power, that Derrida is discussing. We may not lament this loss; that is, we may happily answer “Yes!” Derrida’s own position is unclear to me. But this implied accommodation may also be the precondition for the rise of the functionary—the incarnation of Kant’s “businessman or technician of learning”—in the modern university, where I use the term to name an actor without any specific activity to accomplish (from Latin *fungor*, “to occupy oneself with anything”).<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps this lack of specificity or absence of reference to which Derrida points when he says that the modern university is “in a situation of heteronomy,” a situation predicated on the “*representation of autonomy*” (6; emphasis added). But the more immediate question again is whether interdisciplinarity, as a form of accommodation among the faculties and as an aim of the university administration, also names this absence.

At the beginning of his essay, Derrida is unable to decide whether Kant’s university is “in ruins or simply never existed, having only ever been able to shelter the discourse of its non-accomplishment” (12). This indecision brings me to a brief look at Bill Readings’s 1996 book *The University in Ruins*. According to Readings:

The modern university has had three ideas. The story begins, as do so many stories about modernity, with Kant, who envisioned the University as guided by the concept of *reason*. Kant’s vision is followed by Humboldt’s idea of *culture*, and more recently the emphasis has been on the techno-bureaucratic notion of *excellence*.<sup>12</sup>

A key concept in Reading’s argument is “dereferentialization” (17), by which he means the process wherein “culture [and the university’s cultural function] ceases to mean anything as such.” As a “dereferentialized” term, “excellence” has become the “unifying project” of what he calls the “University of Excellence”—that is, of “an excellent bureaucratic corporation” in which “teaching and research, as aspects of professional life, are subsumed under administration” (125). But

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 183: “This is one of the reasons for which leftists have proved such excellent functionaries of the University, even in conservative regimes: they believe that they are the guardians of a true culture of which the extant regime is merely a false or ideological version.”

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. Page numbers for subsequent citations of this source will be given in the text. Readings proposes that Excellence be replaced by Thought: “The name of Thought precisely is a name in that it has *no intrinsic meaning*. In this sense, it is like excellence. However, Thought differs from excellence in that it does not bracket the question of value” (159; emphasis in the original).

Readings's book is not a manifesto against dereferentialization. Rather, it is a proposal for putting it to use against Enlightenment nostalgia, German Idealism, and capitalist profit motives. We can all appreciate Readings's claim that the university is becoming "an excellent bureaucratic corporation" in which "excellence draws only one boundary: the boundary that protects the unrestricted power of the bureaucracy" (33).

In making this argument, Readings notes the contemporaneous emergence of excellence and interdisciplinarity:<sup>13</sup>

We can be interdisciplinary in the name of excellence, because excellence only preserves pre-existing disciplinary boundaries insofar as they make no larger claim on the entirety of the system and pose no obstacle to its growth and integration. To put this another way, the appeal to excellence marks the fact that there is no longer any idea of the University, or rather that the idea has now lost all content. As a non-referential unit of value entirely internal to the system, excellence marks nothing more than the moment of technology's self-reflection. All that the system requires is for activity to take place, and the empty notion of excellence refers to nothing other than the optimal input/output ratio in matters of information. (39)

A central hinge in the argument, going back to Kant, is the distinction between the inside and the outside of the university—or, rather, the middle position occupied by the "businessmen or technicians of learning," the functionaries of the university. The question raised here is whether there is an inverse relationship between the various forms of accommodation reached among the faculties, one of which may be interdisciplinarity or restructuring, and the increasing control of these functionaries (or administrators) as the effect of shrinking budgets.

Readings's *University in Ruins* is now seventeen years old. How does the idea of the "university in ruins" relate to our current interrogation of interdisciplinarity and the restructuring of the humanities? The strange thing about ruins, as many have noted, is that they are both nostalgic and (for lack of a better term) futuristic; they signify a past that, in the words of Herodotus, "fades with time" (*Histories* 1.1–5) and a future made up of the ruins of the present. In using the figure of the ruin, however, Readings is not arguing that the university be treated as an object of longing for the past or hope for the future; the ruined university allows for what he calls *dissensus* in the present rather than consensus about what the university once was or could become. Such dissensus, argues Readings, undoes the "presumption of communication" and the idea that we can all speak the same language in the pursuit of a common truth (184). In other words, the university in ruins is a landscape in which the contingency of value-terms like "Excellence" is revealed and in which disciplinarity is "a *permanent question*" (177). Two questions follow: (1) As an institutional response, does interdisciplinarity forestall this question? (2) Does it prevent us, in Readings's words, from contemplating "the horizon of the disappearance of the university" (129), not as the calculated effect of administrative fiat but as the beneficial effect of receding paradigms? The extent to which these questions resist easy answers may constitute a response to the call for the restructuring of the humanities. A

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<sup>13</sup> Readings begins (*ibid.*, 28) with the mission statement of the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Montreal, where he was teaching when he was writing the book.