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The Uninvited Guest

The story of late academe is of course tied up with various Arcadian or apocalyptic mythologies. Inescapable is the legend of the uninvited guest, the party crasher, the deeply unnecessary “plus-one,” the one who has to sit in the folding chair. As this story goes, white younger-son types and idealistic secular-nuns filled the modest halls and offices of primitive academe. Mildly eccentric pedants abounded, coinciding with passionate loyalty to particular Great Books. Its poetics of space came from chalk, blackboards, a movable battered podium for the professor, and wooden chairs with desk-arms for the students. You were allowed to smoke in class. Close reading was the name of the game, probably in most humanities classes. One stuck to the text. Events outside the classroom remained outside of it.

Little wonder that Edward Said fashioned himself as an exile. His self-proclaimed exilic marginality allowed him to join the club but to remain halfway out the door. In fact the two others who comprise the also mythical postcolonial trinity, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, also kept one foot out the door, Spivak letting her green card lapse and refusing to become a US citizen, Bhabha remaining a Parsee to the core. These three can stand for all those who entered academe as representatives of the new social movements, Black and women’s and LGBTQ+ ideas, and all the other inchoate groupings that were beginning to pull themselves together.

Another aspect of Late Academe, besides exilic marginality, is the pharmakon, a reappropriated Greek word referring to an object that functions as both a poison and a cure. Late academics often embodied this walking paradox. A more pointed term for such figures is parasite, also a

subversively refunctioned put-down word. The parasite matched primitive academe in its antiquity, its eccentricity, and its uselessness. Drone status is aristocratic. Comic writer P.G. Wodehouse specified the Drones Club as the favorite resort of trust-fund wastrel Bertie Wooster and the other club members, all as useless as is Bertie himself. The parasite, as uninvited guest who disrupts the seating arrangements, is a venerable human type from Roman and Elizabethan drama. In the stock roles such as tricky servant or Wise Fool, parasites were allowed to speak the truth. Why would the disgusting word “parasite” be associated with so privileged a minority? An answer may be that the word is etymologically a spatial metaphor—a being that dwells “next to” (*para-*) a source of “food” (*sitos*)—and thus Bertie and other drones were gifted with an unusually closeness to those who were in power. Similarly, in literary studies, the critical parasite is a secret sharer of literary delectables. A post-WWII literary theorist rarely creates anything new. This sets them apart from primitive New Critics who doubled as poets or essayists. Late academics read novels, essays, and plays. On rare occasions they appear in them. But they don’t write them.

In everyday speech a parasite is “a sponger, a lazy profiteer, a drain on society” a filcher, a chiseler. But in a biologist’s terms, the parasite is “an ancient and respectable view of life” (Playfair 2007, 19). Michel Serres in his study, *The Parasite*, says that that social parasites disrupt the usual economies of capitalism:

The parasite is invited to the table d’hôte; in return, he must regale the other diners with his stories and his mirth. To be exact, he exchanges good talk for good food; he buys his dinner, paying for it in words. It is the oldest profession in the world.

Or ask yourself who, in the following anecdote (out of Serres *The Parasite*) might be identified with the literary critic.

A vagrant, dying of hunger, is sniffing the great smells coming from a restaurant, but a kitchen worker comes out and demands to be paid for these enjoyable aromas. The cook and the beggar start to fight. A third person comes along and resolves the conflict by bouncing a coin on the sidewalk. He gives his decision: the sound of the coin is fair exchange for the smell of the roast. He smiles. Justice is done. (Serres 2007)

The parasite invents something new. “Since he does not eat like everyone else, he builds a new logic:” instead of food exchanged for money, the parasite proposes a scent exchanged for a sound. He does not eat like everyone else: in this sense, the parasite invites comparison to the anorectic or bulimic. My friend, the poet Albert Goldbarth, periodically when we went out would ejaculate, “Aram! stop playing with your food and eat it.” As a deeply anorectic assistant professor, I was ruining Albert’s meal. The Jewish poet from Chicago and the Lebanese owner of Sak Souk, where we used to eat, were all of us exiles and outliers in this south-central Kansas town of Wichita.

Outsiders and parasites completely overturned the literary canon by 1985. It was largely adjunct professors who were grudgingly rounded up to appease the students’ forceful demands for African, Asian, LatinX, and Queer literature. English departments had to look beyond the tenured staff. “Our department couldn’t satisfy them, students went elsewhere,” Homi Bhabha said about Harvard. (Bhabha Interview 18). But by the early 1990s, the same moment when Bill Clinton outlawed welfare mothers, literary critics were on their way to being expelled from the workforce.

Capitalism has no tolerance for parasites. *Paid flatterer* cannot be your job description on your W-2 form. The ever-popular parasites of Roman and Renaissance drama always functioned as an irritating yet sustaining force to the rulers. Think of Volpone's parasite Mosca who depises work but loves money; Lear's Fool who argues cogently that justice is identical to riches; the tricky servant of Roman comedy, who always makes out fine; Sancho Panza cheering on Don Quixote to outrageous expense. Mosca, actually listed as "the parasite" in the *dramatis personae* watches his master counting gold coins and exclaims,

You know the use of riches, and dare give now
From that bright heap, to me, your poor observer,

Mosca both drains and enhances his master's resources. But his master too is purely a parasite. Volpone, master and grandee, is a con-man, a fraud, a legacy hunter convincing rich men to leave him their money. But he also shatters first principles of then-emerging capitalism. He refuses to lend money at interest. Driving this point home, Volpone brags,

I gain
No common way; I use no trade, no venture;...
I turn no moneys in the public bank,
Nor usure private. (*Volpone* 1.1.31-38)

There is a class of parasitic insects, well-known to entomologists, that attach themselves to other insects. The poet Swift knew about this sub-species and felt that humans had their own version of the insect in literary circles:

So nat'ralists observe, a flea

Hath smaller fleas that on him prey;

And these have smaller fleas to bite 'em. And so proceeds *ad infinitum*.

Thus every poet, in his kind,

Is bit by him that comes behind. (Swift 1733)

The history of international literary theory offers a perfect example of smaller fleas biting. After the first big theory conference at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, some graduate students composed and distributed a satirical, insider's *Guide to the Newer Criticism*. "It was full of helpful hints. The only one I remember is, so, yeah: 'Don't preface your essay with an epigraph from T.S. Eliot.' That's fucking over. And also, if you were using problematic as a noun you were fine, problematic as an adjective you just might as well be living in 1958" (Michaels interview 2015, 21). High literary theory had barely set foot in America, and already the snarky students were making hay with it.

Harold Bloom parasite on theory far more profitably with his hugely popular best-seller, *The Anxiety of Influence*. The book was premised on the insight that poets steal, copy, and feed on earlier poets' ideas and styles.

Parasite theory played out faithfully on the local socioeconomic level. My first job was at Marymount College of Kansas, run by the religious Sisters of St. Joseph, smack in the middle of Kansas. They ran the college but the Catholic diocese owned it: the sisters in a sense parasited on the diocese. My anorectic eating habits gave embodied form to my weak social position as a poorly paid starving academic without health insurance. I had dropped to 80% of my normal

weight. Thusly did a would-be punk in tight jeans transition into an insecure assistant professor of English at a failing Catholic college that was itself parasitic on the Catholic diocese. The fleas took turns biting each other. Or else, like me, they gave up eating altogether.

The Kansans pretended to tolerate me. I was a familiar old-academic type. MA and PhD thesis directors hold pharaoh-like absolute power over their minions. Even superstar Homi Bhabha was a subservient, quasi-feudal servant, back when he first came to England: “Then there was my participation in the Lacan reading group where for about eight months my major contribution was making the tea in the break between the sessions” (Homi Bhabha Interview with Veerer 9).

But the intruding parasite can change a whole system for the better. When Said crashed a small but exclusive party of *Orientalists*, he made himself foundational to the culture we have today. Very quickly after the book’s 1978 publication, academic departments, schools, and institutes of “oriental studies” changed their centuries-old titles, revised their curricula, and demanded new textbooks that deleted all references to “the Orient” and “the oriental.” An unscheduled interference by an unanticipated parasite had ruined everything in the cupboard. All those institutes, conferences, and named chairs had to go.

Under pressure from exiles and parasites, late academe changed, and the changes trickled into culture at large. After *Orientalism*, no politician, foundation sponsor, NGO director, or television commentator could ever again seriously use the word *oriental*. This transformation was a direct result of Said’s intervention. A parasite had spoiled the stuff in the Eurocentric cupboard.

Does it seem fair to say that very similar spoilage has stemmed from the various feminisms, LGBTQ+ studies, post-colonial and critical race theory? The outsiders and intruders who make up the core and essence of late academe upset the old balance and produce new logics that unfold in an undulating plurality. The leaders of late academe remain outside it, entering only at twilight and rearranging all the chairs.