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Electing a Department: Differences, Fictions, and a Narrative

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"If I were to make a critical comment on the English department, I would say that it is not enough like the media representation of it."
—Stanley Fish on the Duke English department

1.

"No word of this meeting is to be spoken outside this room." So spake my chair both at the beginning and the end of the biggest department meeting in recent years. All but one of twenty-one permanent, tenure-track members were present. Our occasion was to choose candidates for two new positions. The search committee had labored long and hard. Everybody was abuzz with anticipation. The meeting had even drawn me, for only the second time that year. What is electing an English department? In a very real sense, it is a narrative, including the story of why a senior member would disdain its formal deliberations, why hiring usually proves so contentious, and why a chair would be moved to mark all business as strictly private.

One thing especially needs to be stressed about this narrative: it is never told in specific terms. "In the department," begins Nicolai Gogol's great story, "The Overcoat" — but then the narrator wavers: "but perhaps it is just as well not to say which department. There is nothing more touchy and ill-tempered than departments, regiments, government offices, and indeed any kind of official body" (5). Any academic department is no different. The only

departments that receive public representation are those, such as Duke's, whose members or whose institutions already enjoy enough renown that they have specificity to waste. Even in these cases there are limits; we never expect to learn what Fredric Jameson really thinks of Frank Lentricchia's divorce. My narrative will be designed at once to challenge and to explore these limits. The following account would be different if I had made the same discreet choice as Gogol's narrator, who "in order to avoid all sorts of unpleasant misunderstandings," concludes that "we shall refer to the department in question as *a certain department*."

How much difference? To some, no doubt, not much. Nobody in my department commands a national reputation. No one outside my department could recognize anybody referred to here, or would care to. Indeed, to some we will all variously appear familiar enough in some stereotypical sense, and to read a specific tale of our deliberations will appear the stuff of banality rather than transgression. To others, however, the following pages will represent a breach of discretion. The actual department business of real departments is properly conducted in private, and a public narrative of even one hiring decision is neither responsible nor ethical. How much difference will such a narrative make? Perhaps it depends upon what sort of inquiry it is designed to serve.

It might be more accurate to characterize the following pages as an exploration into the nature of academic departments with a narrative embedded in it. The argument is that a department as a social entity has been continually repressed in educational discourse; indeed, this is why we lack narratives. Two things especially result from this repression. First, the necessary fiction of a department can be stabilized as a structure, recreated ultimately in the interests of the research university model that initiated the modern conception of a department. Secondly, the social foundation of this structure fails to be granted any discursive existence, because all authority derives from the elite model, founded on scholarship. It may be the case that all departments suffer from this repression; hence the reason — to take a recent example — why in his most recent study James Sosnoski must sort through so many varied definitions of the term "discipline," as if it had strictly to do with either intellectual work or bureaucratic rule (see *Modern Skeletons* 28-42). Departments such as my own, however, suffer most, because they abide in institutions that cannot support research, and therefore are unable to reconcile their professional identity with their social one. Only this latter identity gives my department its life, even if the former provides its occasion.

But how to express its business as a narrative? Immediately there is the question of whose story it is — and the prospect that there are as many versions of any one department as there are members of it. Everybody has heard of departments whose members are at such complete odds with one another that they cannot even agree when to have a meeting. I heard of another this past year, some of whose members communicate with each other only by e-mail. "We're not that bad," assured my man (at the same institution but in another department). "We all talk to each other in our department." Nonetheless, one can be fairly certain that if each of the people in this virtual department was to try to relate the story of so much as a single year, all would be astonished at the

previously unspoken differences among them. So individual differences must be acknowledged and some risk taken if one wants to open up the conditions by which the basic organizational units of an academic discipline are comprehended: departmental truth is not only muffled and inward but deeply personal. In order to give one's own department as the story of one vote, and to give one vote as the story of the department, much is going to be told that will sound like sheer fiction.

Exactly what sorts of social organizations are departments? Why do so many fall by the wayside along the high road of disciplinarity? Electing a department does not involve a direct, explicit consideration of such questions by its members, even if the questions are lodged at the center of virtually any departmental deliberation. Indeed, it is probably the essence of the election process that such a consideration cannot take place, and in this respect, it seems to me, a narrative of electing a department accords with our deepest sense of all narratives arising from academic life. They are simultaneously heard in two registers: banal and exceptional, impeccably deferred and irredeemably blunt.

2.

It seemed a foregone conclusion. The local favorite for one of the positions was the lover and companion of one of the two most powerful people in the department. In addition, the woman had been teaching composition in the department off and on for a number of years and enjoyed easy social contact with a majority of its members. Finally, everyone seemed agreed that she was a good teacher and that she had conducted her formal job interview with her usual poise. Therefore, it almost appeared vindictive to point out that, among other imperfections, she had not had one graduate course in the area for which the position had been advertised, had never taught a course in it, and had written her dissertation in an entirely different area. I pointed these things out at the meeting anyway.

A few others also wondered about what claims for specialization we were being offered. More spoke in the woman's favor — all discretely ignoring her lack of credentials and emphasizing instead her interview performance. There was really only one other candidate, very well qualified, even if in the context of the meeting she finally had to matter less for herself than as a locus for principled opposition to the local favorite. At last we voted. A tie, with two abstentions. Another vote. Another tie, with no abstentions. We were out of time and one vote short of the absolute majority that department rules stipulated. A special vote was quickly announced two days hence, ballots to be cast in a box on the department secretary's desk.

What story of the department had transpired to this point? In one respect, it is a narrative having to do with the enormous recent increase in temporary, part-time faculty. Whatever principles of sociality obtain, it is difficult to ignore adjuncts at the departmental coffeepot. No matter that it happens all the time anyway; one of the cruelest academic stories I know is of an adjunct who thought she was on friendly terms with a permanent member until he abruptly said to her one day, "I really don't want to talk to you anymore because

adjuncts are always leaving." Tenured people, in my experience, are often capable of talking more frankly to the untenured (in large departments, this includes grad students) than to their own permanent colleagues, and they often fight ferociously for less secure friends if a spot on the tenure track opens up. In this particular election, the spot had been created, by the simple procedure of adding the local favorite to the three already selected by the search committee.

In terms of my emphasis, her addition more sharply reformulated the conflict between two quite separate visions: the department as a professional organization and as a social one. Indeed, given the way in which a department such as my own is inscribed in the institutional hierarchy of American higher education, this conflict is inescapable. Supporters of the local favorite might not agree, of course. Undoubtedly supporters of any local favorite never agree — rightly or wrongly — that the person is finally being considered solely for social reasons, and of course this may not always be the case, even if in departments such as mine it is almost guaranteed to be so. More interesting, though, is the fact that social reasons must remain unenunciated, even among a group of people for whom they are decisive.

Of course, in one sense this is as it should be. Few departments labor without the illusion that new members are chosen on the basis of criteria safely removed from the conviction that certain people are "just not one of us," as I recall a colleague blurting out years ago during another meeting. In another sense, however, the repression of the social exacts a terrible cost, because even a candidate not worth the name must be publicly accountable as a good teacher, a sound scholar, or a knowledgeable theorist. There is no other official vocabulary. Thus, the moment of the social imperative always marks any department's division from itself. It shouldn't ever happen from a strict professional vantage that a department would be caught in the throes of its affection for a local candidate. My guess is that it happens all the time — everywhere.

Clarion's difference from Harvard or Duke lies in the fact that departments at these distinguished institutions do not have to face this division, over and over again. There, local favorites are exceptions — if not (one trusts) exceptional. Hence, for example, Harvard's famous dean, Henry Rosovsky, is quite clear: Harvard staffs its departments according to who is the best in the world in any field.[1] It is left to most other universities to manage their own versions of this lofty standard. The official conception of the department handed down to them by the dynamic, ambitious research model ignores how few can approximate it and disdains any other idea, especially a social one. To Rosovsky, the social represents a suspect, if not degraded, realm of "petty jealousy." Or, to take another, more recent example, the social has to be almost ignored — if not entirely unlamented — in David Damrosch's account of the sovereign figure of the individual scholar, who works alone and belongs to a department only in the most nominal fashion.

Clarion's local favorites, on the other hand, are not exceptional, because the department is not in place to define itself exclusively as a disciplinary entity. Local favorites are instead a constitutive feature of our departmental composition. The pain is that, each time we elect someone into the department, the decisive role of social pressures cannot be admitted — although, each time, it

must somehow be assessed. Even though the results have not always been unhappy for the English department — at least we don't openly scream at the chairman, as a senior man did at my first department meeting many years ago — the process never transpires without bitterness, resentment, and renewed factionalism. To put the ultimate consequence still more crudely, the department finally *is* this division between the professional and the social.

Granted, few will dispute our authority to teach topic sentences, the Pearl poet, and slave narratives — although many members were alarmed a couple of years ago when, at one of those meetings convened so that the administration could "engage in dialogue," the new dean instructed the department to have a proposed position in medieval literature reborn as one in cultural studies so that we would have a better chance to consider minority candidates. Nevertheless, as a department we are not ultimately a group of professionals who "profess" such subjects as much as a group of individuals who have to relate to each other, day by day, in terms of them.

Why write of all this so specifically? I was enjoined not to. Let me begin to answer this question by reformulating it: why be enjoined not to? And then to pose a further question: whose interests are being served by everybody so being enjoined? Those of the department considered as a family? But a chair is not a father, nor do the rest of the members of a department bond or dispute among themselves as siblings. Nowadays their individual backgrounds are likely to be too varied, while the old paternalistic model of a chair's authority has become exhausted. My department was more familial when I joined it over twenty-five years ago and immediately fell under the venerable tyranny of an old chair whom just about everyone feared, hated, and loved to tell incredible stories about. I felt enlisted into a Freudian Band of Brothers (there were only two women), before the patricidal deed had been done. It never was, though. Our father's end came rather lamely and sadly. He just crept away like the old bachelor he was, and we children were left without any clear image of how to reproduce his power.

The peculiar authority of any chair cannot be put better than it is by Richard Ohmann: "the chairman's power comes from the multiversity in which departments find themselves, and it is necessary because decisions have to pass back and forth between a managerial and a professional setting" (218). There is a sense in which a chair is structurally compromised. Because a chair is at once representative of the "remotest arm" of the administration (as Ohmann goes on to explain) and of the inner recesses of the department, it is often not clear in whose name s/he acts. Whether or not enjoining us on this particular occasion not to speak outside was intended by the chair simply to encourage discussion, discussion was in fact discouragingly brief and restrained. Energies at variance with fictions of professionalism were free to continue and to issue their own challenge in terms of the upcoming vote. Everybody knew what seethed beneath the rules. In whose name, finally, were we being asked to forget?

Worst of all, it seemed to me that we were being asked this day to make over our own departmental interests, such as they could be made manifest, in the image of the institution. Of course in many ways the interests of the part

and the whole are identical; one could even claim that a department *has* no interests apart from the larger ones of its institution.[2] What I want to claim myself is that the category of the social marks the limits of mutual interest. The administration can only be concerned about the members of a department getting along with each other insofar as the department's administrative functioning is threatened. The members themselves, on the other hand, not only know far more intimately how this functioning is dependent upon getting along; they know how sometimes sheer getting along is more important — bureaucratic license or disciplinary integrity be damned. This vote was one such time. Once again, the English department had to decide on its own reason for being.

I have failed to emphasize how excited I had grown at the prospect. "All bets are off," somebody said. Others knew for how many years all bets had already been settled because all important decisions were based on the same two factions. Could these factions have at last dissipated, as rumored? Only in the last couple of years had a significant number of new people come into the department. "It's a different department now," people had taken to exclaiming, always with a certain wonderment. Everybody sensed that no vote so much as this one over hiring a local favorite would reveal how new the department really had become. Before the meeting, I even thought of my old retired colleague, and how he used to relish the infrequent times when business as usual was going to fail. "God, how I love chaos, Terry. It's all we can hope for."

Perhaps those ready to vote for the local favorite were in thrall of similar energies. Ohmann begins his chapter on English departments by citing George Bernard Shaw's aphorism about all professions as conspiracies against the laity, and then compares English departments to "the conspirators' cell groups" (209). He means the conspiracy to be directed at the public. What about a conspiracy directed at the department's own disciplinary self-image, as dictated by the public? Maybe from the outside it does not make sense why a department would settle for mediocrity, familiarity, and other unworthy professional goals, each heedless of the official imperative for unremitting innovation in all things. (The number of untold departmental narratives about forced compliance to affirmative action guidelines must be legion.) From the inside, however, where these sorts of things can be casually misrepresented, where inertia sometimes feels sweet, and where few care to hear about new knives, much less cutting edges, it can be deeply satisfying to bond once more against the vast, threatening outside, and to hell with administrative directives about multiculturalism, disciplinary ones about the latest theory from Duke, or political ones about outcomes' assessments.

Exactly what *unites* a group? At root, certain prescribed ways of negotiating with the outside so that the group can perpetuate its identity. The peculiar groups that are academic departments have their respective identities so consummately rationalized, though, that a species of fatigued formality quite typically transpires with respect to the outside. Donald Barthelme has a lovely story, "The New Member," about this operation. Members of a unnamed committee begin their meeting by taking note of a man looking in from outside a window. Immediately the meeting comes to be about the group's fascination with this man, or perhaps rather its inability to direct its attention to the "press-

ing items" of the agenda. The only item actually addressed is "the Worth girl." One man moves she be hit by a car. Another woman moves that the Worth girl fall in love with the man outside. Eventually all agree to invite him in, whereupon he states, no, he has no grievance, he just wants to "'be with somebody'" (184). The committee understands. A motion is soon forthcoming to make the man a member. The motion passes easily. The man sits down and begins to announce, among other things, that everyone has to wear overalls, no one can wear nose rings, and gatherings of one or more persons are prohibited.

What Barthelme presents is an exquisitely incoherent dance of social energy, collapsed into formalism. The old members need a new member not so much to change the rules as to reinvigorate themselves in relation to each other. (This, in turn, is the point of having rules.) I suppose the need arises in any group grown idle about its energies. Was this the case in my own department at the time of the vote for its own new member? Perhaps there are times in the history of a group when only a new member can reveal how old everybody is. My truest objection to the local favorite was that she was not new. Indeed, so well integrated into the department was she, and not only because of her relationship to one of its most powerful members, that you could hardly see around her. Consequently, a vote against her appeared to me as a vote for the Outside itself. What story could a department tell itself if it was willing to renounce its need for an outside?

Of course there are always plenty of official narratives to be constructed each year for versions of outsides. In large part, even the day-to-day business of a department consists in its mutual commitment to the necessity for such narratives. Everybody has to write teaching observations on everybody else according to the bargaining agreement, committees have to report at meetings to the department as a whole, the chair has to draw up curriculum and pedagogical stories for the administration to hear — to mention these only. (The previous year much of our own departmental time had been invested in a grand narrative called the NCATE report, required each ten years for certification on the national level. I chanced to ask the chair what the letters stood for, and she had to ask somebody else.) But all these narratives are really registers of a deeper, if wider, interiority whereby a department simultaneously recreates an institution and is recreated by it. Hiring raises the possibility of another story.

But what story? Normally, in most departments, I suppose, the plot lines hardly get established as something very different. Any recruitment remains embedded in the institution. It is still conducted along disciplinary lines. Yet a new member might not fit — or might fit in unusually provocative ways. A group has every right to be excited at the prospect. I could not help but sit amid mine the afternoon of the vote and wonder precisely how I belonged myself. I had once been friends of a sort with the local favorite, for example. What sense did this make now, much less the reasons why we were no longer friends? I knew of a position in another department where a friend of mine was the local but not, evidently, the favorite. How different was this man's situation? How different is any department from another? Does every departmental narrative have to refract into its most individual, personal plot lines? Was my own lack of sympathy to the social currents energizing our favorite merely because, in the

end, I didn't feel part of them — whether as a colleague or as a scholar, it made no real difference?

One can be a member of a larger department, not to say a more prestigious one, and far more easily remain apart, I think, from the pressure of such questions. Hence, for example, in his recent memoir, Frank Lentricchia can write as follows: "I teach English at a distinguished university, in which like all English departments I have known or heard about, we have virtually nothing in common, not even literature" (11). Lentricchia can be forgiven for being unable to broaden his social, if not discursive, base. The circumstances in which most academics labor, however, are far more unforgiving. An old friend likes to recall the first jobs of her and her husband at a small liberal arts school. Early in the year, they attended a concert. A couple from his department sat next to them. At intermission, the man confessed to being bored and suggested they all retire to his house for a drink. My friend and her husband looked at each other. Alas, they demurred. The story of how he lost his job over this incident is too intricate (and unbelievable) to tell. "We should have known better," my friend concludes. True. Embedded within the professionalized departmental narrative we should all know better. The basic point of this latter narrative, however, is that what we would know should remain uncontaminated by the debased social realm of the anecdotal, which is irrelevant to the discipline.

For a time in a foreign country I taught with a man who came from a junior college in the South. "We like each other," he used to say of his department; "we do lots of things together." Periodically I asked him to repeat how collectively happy everybody was, so incredible did it seem to me. Could it only happen in a junior college, consigned to a lowly position in academic ranking? (Or else it could only happen long ago, and then probably only through the efforts of an exuberant chair. See Spilka for the sort of richly anecdotal account that *College English* would not very likely publish today.) One admits how much sociality matters (because research does not) only very grudgingly. More recently at a conference I met a woman from another junior college. I asked her how many courses she taught. She said five: "It's all right, we have fun together. We don't have the pressures you do because we don't have any 'airs.'"

One could hazard an axiom: the more institutionally low, the more departmentally happy. And yet people will not necessarily like each other because they have only themselves or lack some official basis on which to compete; for one thing, there will always have to be elections to hire new members. The following formulation seems better: the more illusions (warranted or not) about scholarship, the less acknowledgment of the significance of sociality. Therefore, most departments regularly purchase the first at the expense of the second — as no one will have to remind the dour Lentricchia (or even the misunderstood Fish, his former chair). Alas, though, groups of people need occasions in order to be revealed to themselves as groups, if not to experience themselves in this way. My department (as opposed to its factions) has always been poor in such occasions. I stopped going to the few sporadic ones, including the Christmas party some years ago when a drunken colleague arrived late and proceeded to vomit on her hostess' rug. Everyone agreed afterwards that the event was at least a lot more fun than anything that happens at a department meeting.

3.

After such incoherence, what story? Can the real one about any department be told as merely how someone in the group relates to the others? Or is the deeper narrative instead the recurrent hope, manifest in a number of different ways, and only fitfully collective, that one day a new member will come along to make good all the unused, stale, or disvalued social possibilities? Granted, such concerns about a department could not be more different than, say, those of James Phelan, when he laments the Duke phenomenon of securing preeminence by hiring away top people and speaks of the necessity for a "better model" (196). It involves "people with diverse interests and expertise who share more fundamental beliefs about education, critical discourse, and inquiry." The telling thing to me is that Phelan is apparently under no pressure to realize how utterly his wish is rebuked by the disturbing moment where he meets a colleague and they just "have a good talk," much to Phelan's amazement that such a thing so rarely happens (48).

Such things probably happen more often in my department, because we are not subject to the research demands of Phelan's (which is the first thing he and his colleague begin to talk about). "How is your research going?" is not, after all, a question designed to elicit profound human contact. Indeed, it could easily be argued that the purpose of an academic department is to inhibit such contact, as meetings transpire over each year's budget, each semester's course schedule, and the constitution of standing and ad hoc committees. These are almost exclusively the terms in which Joel Colton discusses "The Role of the Department in the Groves of Academe" in *The Academic Handbook*. It is not his concern if someone refuses to post office hours, if nobody wants to chair the evaluation committee, or if there simply are no curricular dreams to be dreamed this year.[3] Colton begins by noting the common wisdom once expressed by a popular faculty member, speaking to students and extolling the virtues of an academic career. He is asked if there are any disadvantages. "Yes," the professor replies, "the colleagues in one's own department" (261). In such a context, how not to long for Phelan's notion of a department?

There are two basic reasons why not. First, Phelan's vision is simply false. People in an academic department are defined in terms of their commitment to their discipline, not to each other. Hence they are academics in the first place (and only committed to each other in some other way after the fact). Hence also, Phelan himself rarely gets together with any of his colleagues in order to share fundamental beliefs. The Ohio State English department may have fewer parties than the Clarion English department. He mentions only a few people, who have his same intellectual interests. What Phelan does he does alone. There really *is* no stable structural analogy for how his real activity participates in the larger life of his department, especially insofar as the activity consists not only of solitary worrying — about teaching, giving papers, and publishing a book — but of aspiring to join another department (eventually his own chair has to be told), albeit as the occupant of an endowed chair.

Second, Phelan's vision lacks political nuance. We do not need better models of departments. We need better fictions. The reason we do not get them is

because of institutional hierarchy. An institution such as Ohio State simply transmits the organizing logic of elite institutions, founded on a research imperative whereby each member of a department is comprehended not as a social being but as a scholar who works alone. (Again, Damrosch is eloquent on this point.) Phelan sentimentalizes community not only because he lacks it but because he lacks any mandate to have any. Of course nobody else has any either. Yet what this means in practice is that large, doctoral universities effectively set the terms. Compare to Phelan a Penn State professor in a recent letter to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about how my university is different from his: "There is a kind of unity of mission on that campus. The faculty is not composed of independent scholarly entrepreneurs. It is more united than the diverse faculty at our cumbersome multiversity" (Phillips B3). Penn State, in other words, gets to say what Clarion is, and not vice versa. Consigned to an "organic" realm, Clarion speaks only to itself and for itself. No wonder it opts for local favorites.

Let me enlarge on this last point by citing a remark from a recent article of Graff's. He has been emphasizing how disabled academics are from explaining what they do to anybody else because they teach in isolation from each other. One problem that follows from this is that even students are excluded from a larger conversation and prevented from understanding the intellectual allegiances or identities of their various professors. "'You call yourself a Marxist-feminist, but you sound like just a bourgeois liberal to me.' This contesting of identifications takes place frequently at our academic conferences but rarely in our classrooms" ("Academic Writing" 16). More to my context, such contesting rarely takes place in our halls, or our coffee lounges, or our department meetings. Undoubtedly it should. But it does not — and instead conferences seem to multiply, especially at the regional or even local level. Could this be because departments have become more constricted? What is a haplessly socialized member of one to do, for all manner of other invigoration, but go to a conference? Graff's line appears scarcely conceivable anywhere else. Therefore, the most searching and consoling stories available to the profession at the present time may no longer be the product of departments, but of conferences.

Meanwhile, we fail to get better fictions about departments because the focus for an academic discipline continues to be lodged at the departmental level. Once more this paradigm serves the interests of research institutions that in fact secure their preeminence by a disciplinary organization based on linkages among departments rather than on membership in any one. (Berkeley hires from Yale and vice versa. Phelan, from Chicago, is understandably sour that he came in second at Berkeley. He still makes all his important professional moves at conferences, and from there emerge all his candid conversations.) One way this organization consolidates itself is precisely through conferences; they are expensive to attend, feature papers expressive of the latest fashions, and encourage in all sorts of ways the maintenance of institutional boundaries based on status. (To be from a place no one has heard of seldom elicits conversation at the cash bar.) However, more conferences — many now organized by universities that enjoy little status — do not necessarily open up the possibilities for who gets to deliver papers at the MLA or the English Institute. These confer-

ences do, however, offer increased opportunities for sociality, and especially for recuperating lost, idle, or stagnant sociality back home.

Perhaps the social actuality of a department may finally not be intelligible except in terms either larger or smaller than those of the disciplinary or administrative unit. Most may never experience themselves in larger terms. Most may not want to. (At any conference one is guaranteed to hear about these.) What difference does it make to such a department to be mindful of another whose whole identity is founded upon easy access to a wider professional world? English departments at the majority of universities throughout the United States function, after all, as small, intricate entities only nominally related to this world. Members in these departments may read about it. Their universities lack the resources to enable them to contribute to it; instead, only highly localized versions of the values of the great world are possible. At one point in Molly Hite's novel, *Class Porn*, the heroine hears a tenured member exclaim about another man on their committee that he's a "great guy," and then she thinks as follows: "It's one of the conventions of our committee that when you mention the name of somebody on it you're supposed to be overcome with emotion. The emotions differ hierarchically, of course. When my name is mentioned, for instance, presumably everybody laughs" (145). She's just a lowly lecturer without her dissertation finished. People who lack a Ph.D. lack even the recognition of another university.

Hite's amusing novel is not an example of what I mean by a better fiction about departmental life. For one thing, Eleanor Nyland renounces this life by the novel's end. Renunciation happens recurrently in academic novels — and, if not, at least academic life has been sorely tested, usually by erotic horizons heretofore unimagined. Stories that trace the precise contours of a department's own narrow bounds in order to embrace them by the end are, on the other hand, far more rare, harsh, and precious. I think of them as fictions of friendship. Friendship really doesn't have anything to do with departments at all, and may more often function in them as yet another threat to their social coherence; even friends, as in my own late instance, have to vote.[4] Nonetheless, to friends, the sheer *conspiracy* of professional life is eased. Friendship is probably the best, most humanizing possibility available to most of us in departments, because it promises the story neither of structure nor hierarchy, although inescapably implicated in each.

Let me conclude with one of the finest academic fictions I know: Bernard Malamud's "Rembrandt's Hat." Arkin, an art historian, is a dozen years younger than Rubin, a sculptor, at the New York art school where both teach. The men are friendly, but not friends. They become enemies after the day when Arkin admiringly compares one of Rubin's many odd hats to one from a middle-aged self-portrait of Rembrandt. After that Rubin ceases to wear the hat and appears to Arkin to be avoiding him. Months pass. One day Arkin happens into Rubin's studio. There's really only one piece that he likes. Another day, while showing some slides, he sees that the hat Rubin wore months earlier more resembled that of a cook at a diner than it did Rembrandt's. Later he returns to the sculptor's studio, congratulates him on the fine piece, and apologizes for mixing up the hats so long ago. Rubin accepts the apology. But the

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two men become no more than cordial to each other. Once Arkin spots Rubin regarding himself in the bathroom mirror in a white cap that now really does appear to resemble Rembrandt's hat.

What seems to me especially beautiful about this story is how the air of a very peculiar human contact — close, fragile, intolerably slight and painfully interiorized — lifts off its plot. Where else but in an academic department could Rubin have taken the exact kind of offense he does, and who else but an academic such as Arkin could have expressed it with such apparent casualness? There are departments in which people teach together for decades and yet fail to achieve as much clarification of their mutual feelings for each other as Malamud's narrative provides his two characters. How necessary is it to us for others to tell us who we are? Or are we content to think we know already? In the end, the distinctive thing about the stories possible in any department may be that they must remain partial, blunted, baffled, or just silenced. Beyond the estimable professional reasons, I am not sure why this should be so — unless there are embodied in academic attire such depths of self-regard that no disciplinary formation, no administrative directive, and no social group can be devised to organize, address, or confront them.

4.

About the department vote: when the third round was counted, two days later, the local favorite was defeated, 11-9. One member continued to abstain. There was speculation. Few really know why he did. Another member switched his or her vote. More speculation. No one could be absolutely certain who. The new member returned her signed contract in time to permit the fact to be announced at the last meeting of the semester. No expression of opinion was heard.

Notes

1. Gerald Graff awards Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president of Johns Hopkins University, the honor of having created the modern research university on the model of German graduate schools, which included specialized departments. "The word 'department' had been in use in colleges throughout the nineteenth century," notes Graff, "but only now did it take on connotations of disciplinary specialization and administrative autonomy" (*Professing* 58). For the best recent consideration of the costs of the specialized model, see Sosnosky, *Modern Skeletons*, although his alternative attempt to redistribute the same elements of method and subject matter as those he contests seems to me to set aside the important distinction of his earlier study between token and elite professionals.

Arguably the most unspoken question in the profession today is what sort of a specialized department is possible anymore for a group consisting largely of either "token" professors, unrewarded with research time, or "defielded" or "Taylorized" ones, overcome with general education courses and bureaucratized

timetables. Such departments may now be better comprehended in terms of the larger critique of downsizing practices and corporate values to which the entire spectrum of American labor is subject; see Aronowitz and DiFazio.

2. This is an extremely complicated question. James Phelan just deals with it by taking the high road; of the members of an ideal department, he writes as follows: "They make a commitment to each other, and to their institution because they know that without it the ideals won't be realized" (196). Back on the low road, can we assume that the commitment of many department members to each other is, very much on the contrary, based on the felt fact that the institution will never realize their ideals?

Or that, in a very real sense, the institution cannot, if only because it has no reputation? Ohmann's discreet citation from the minutes of a "major midwestern English department" could not be more in contrast; the whole point of the meeting is that the department has suffered a loss of ranking in a national report. But what about the majority of departments whose institutions enjoy no prestige in national terms? The less claim to larger social or cultural recognition an institution has, I believe, the more inward — in my terms, incoherent — a department will inescapably be.

3. It is, however, the chair's concern. Colton's interest in the human lineaments of this figure is in striking contrast to the rest of his exposition. At one point, for example, he effuses over the "ideal chair": "mediator, negotiator, and arbitrator; budget, personnel, and recruiting officer; advisor on community housing and schooling, and on career opportunities for spouses; chief justice; pastor; parliamentarian; social director; lecture bureau director; team coach; Dutch uncle (or aunt); statistician; housekeeper; general office manager; and personal counselor and mentor" (274). As is common in many accounts of academic departments, the multiplicity and heterogeneity that could be accorded the department as a whole, as well as many other members of it, is used up in a highly interactive, process-oriented idea of the chair, as if this figure could restore in himself or herself the effaced social dimension.

4. And friendship is likely to be more sorely tested when the vote is over tenure rather than a new hire. I must trust that it is clear why my account has to do with the latter rather than the former: nothing is normally at stake over tenure at an institution such as Clarion. Instead, hiring someone is equivalent to giving the person tenure, because we relate to each other not as scholars but as teachers who share common problems and close quarters. Therefore, social controls govern the tenure process long before a tenure vote occurs, so anyone who could have been denied tenure simply has not lasted to the point of a tenure decision; this is why no one in my department has ever been denied tenure.

It is also why the one person who for the first time was recently refused by the department was nonetheless confirmed by the administration — as a department we simply lacked experience in the tenure process as something other than a form of ritual acceptance. The recent episode illustrates, I think, how tenure decisions, unlike ones involving hiring, are less timeless, even at institutions such as Clarion; as Jeffrey Williams puts it (invoking Pierre Bourdieu), "the habituating mechanism of tenure ensures the reproduction of extant

socio-institutional arrangements and hierarchies by its continual adjustment and revision" (137).

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