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4. The McGurl Era?
Literary History, Peak College, and *The Program Era* (2009)

Kathryn S. Roberts

Who wrote this sentence?

> All of our efforts in the world are risky extensions of ourselves, and subject to the mortified recoil of shame, but our efforts at art, like our efforts at love, seem even more so.

No, it's not a self-help book, nor the autobiography of a philandering artist who has read too much Marshall McLuhan. It comes from *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Mark McGurl's celebrated literary history, now more than a decade old (335).[1] This book shaped my professional-intellectual development and sense of scholarly possibility, as an American scholar of American culture, more than any other.

Re-reading it, I was struck not by the argument (now familiar) or the lively case studies (now like favorite tracks on a rediscovered album), but by the voice. It's the voice of a great lecturer: masterful, funny, self-deprecating. *The Program Era* is dense with major and minor literary characters, historical details, systems theory, and literary-sociological coinages like "technomodernism" and "high-cultural pluralism"—which McGurl calls "scholarly barbarisms" (34). If the exemplary format of literary modernism was the poetry anthology, and that of the creative writing program the short story collection, then the not-so-secret scaffolding of McGurl's version of literary history is the survey course syllabus. *The Program Era* is both the best Postwar

1 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

American Lit course you've ever taken and a tutorial on how to do cultural scholarship in the twenty-first century.

And yet "the McGurl Era," if such a thing existed in the tiny corner of the cultural universe called literary studies, may turn out to have been comically short. With Humanities enrollments in decline, the big Literature survey course might not long survive the era McGurl memorializes. And with tenure-track jobs for English PhDs dwindling—the number halved since the 2008 financial crisis and showing no sign of recovery twelve years later—"big" literary histories may too be a thing of the past.[2]

McGurl's penultimate chapter makes two linked claims about literature: first, that the literary world system described by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters*—the system by which writers aspiring to the status of world literature route their careers through cosmopolitan Paris—"may just now be collapsing all around us" (because of technology, or demography, or globalization, or Mandarin). Second, that said era was "a *historical* construction in the cruel colloquial sense" (328). What McGurl wrote about literature may be even truer about literary studies. That scholarly practice is embedded in a historically and nationally specific idea of tertiary education, or as it is known in the United States, "college." This essay reads *The Program Era* in a McGurlian fashion, appreciating it as the virtuosic product of "historical" (in the cruel colloquial sense) institutional conditions that made it possible, and with which the book is itself reflexively engaged.

Systematic Excellence

The Program Era argues that the coupling of university and literature, exemplified by the explosion of creative writing programs after the 1960s, is "the most important event in postwar American literary history" (ix). The university provided salaried employment for writers (as teachers) and trained unprecedented numbers of undergraduates as expert readers, thus shaping

2 "Big book" is McGurl's term for his own effort and Hugh Kenner's 1971 history of modernism, *The Pound Era*, to which his title nods (368). On recent job statistics, see Jonathan Kramnick, "What We Hire in Now: English by the Grim Numbers," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 9, 2018, https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-We-Hire-in-Now-English/245255.

production and reception simultaneously. The book fuses a rigorous historical materialism with convincing claims about literary form. Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, have little in common beyond their class backgrounds and their dependence on universities, but in Chapter Four ("The Hidden Injuries of Craft: Mass Higher Education and Lower-Middle-Class Modernism"), Carver's minimalism and Oates's maximalism emerge as opposite responses to their progress through higher education, and the dialectic of pride and shame that governed it.

Carver's style, McGurl writes, is a feat of affective control through obsessive revision: "If the modern world is a world of risk, … then minimalism is an aesthetic of risk management, a way of being beautifully careful" (294). The stories are thus a double of their own characters, who exhibit "wariness and waiting and protective self-concealment" (275). By contrast, Oates's almost monstrous overproduction—long books in every genre—is a performance of virtuosity that talks about shame all the time, "but hardly ever shows it" (300). Thus the mantras of creative writing—"Write what you know" and "Show don't tell"—get translated into art by two lower-middle-class white writers. Their critical reception, meanwhile, illustrates the "unity" behind stylistic opposites. Critics accuse Oates of "slopping words across the page like a washerwoman flinging soiled water across the cobblestones," Carver of "a 'poverty of imagination'" (297). Writers and critics are locked in a barely-conscious version of "symbolic class warfare," whose rules of engagement are set by the canons, rituals, hierarchies, and opportunities of the postwar university.

Thinking through the Program, McGurl reveals deep continuities among seemingly disparate traditions: Carver's minimalism, Philip Roth's postmodern ethnic fiction, Toni Morrison's transformation of modernist style through a confrontation with Black history. The writers on *The Program Era* syllabus are diverse in terms of race, class, gender, style, and politics, but most of them are acclaimed, and that's the point: the university wins when it "offers hospitality to the excellence of individual self-expression" (408). If writers are critical of that system, then that, too, is valuable. By incorporating the artistic or bohemian or revolutionary outsider into the system itself, the university not only appears less "square," in the language of the sixties counterculture, but also performs the kind of conspicuous waste (here McGurl borrows from Thorstein Veblen) associated with high social status (407). Inside the university, writers are examples of unalienated white-collar labor, or maybe they just give art therapy to stressed-out students. For the outside world, they produce

"unconscious allegories of institutional quality, aesthetically pure because luxuriously useless" (408).

We could call *The Program Era* a *conscious* allegory of institutional quality, interpretively brilliant because academically luxurious. Appealing to both our love and our snobbery, it reflexively models an aesthetic appreciation of the system that produces great books like *The Program Era.* That book ends where it begins, with love and sarcasm, earnestness and irony, the mixed feelings of an institutional being: part of the system but unable or unwilling to leave.

Fair Harvard

The Program Era is itself the product of "college," the peculiar form of higher education that developed in the United States over the course of the twentieth century. In everyday speech, Americans make no distinction between college and university: "she went to Michigan" and "he goes to Oberlin" may convey whole biographies to those in the know, but the two statements don't differ in kind.[3] To understand where McGurl's book fits in the history of American college, it is worth dwelling on college's origins and legacies.

The story begins with Harvard, founded in 1637 by the elders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to train ministers and maintain orthodoxy. Harvard aped the great English universities—Newtowne was quickly rechristened Cambridge.[4] Despite the embrace of Enlightenment science in the eighteenth century, most colleges remained religiously oriented until the Civil War. Then knowledge production increasingly specialized into discrete fields of study, while the overall system diversified, aided by "land grants" for public universities in 1862 and 1890.

Some of this history is in *The Program Era.* McGurl explains how the Arts played a key ideological role in the university's post-Civil War secularization, helping to "smooth over" the passage to modernity by "sublimating the traditional moral-religious emphases of antebellum liberal arts training in the

3 Andrew Delbanco, *College, What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 2.

4 Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1–2.

secular values-discourse of humanistic aesthetics" (39–40).[5] But because the book's focus is the vast system of higher education as a whole, inter-institutional differences tend to fade. For example, McGurl doesn't explain the outsized place of Harvard and other "Ivy League" schools in the cultural imaginary. They set the pattern for American college at large, from curriculum, to admissions and financial aid, to the pageantry of graduation, athletics, and reunions; and they are over-represented in the halls of government, business, and media.[6]

Harvard, where Mark McGurl was an undergraduate and where I was once a PhD student and temporary lecturer, has a weirdly specific institutional vocabulary. "The College" is the geographic, historical, and affective heart of the university. First-year undergraduates live in "the Yard," the oldest part of the school. Commencement ceremonies—a ritual performance of membership in the Harvard alumni community—happen there too. Harvard's endowment is more than 40 billion dollars, and yet its appetite for alumni donations remains voracious. This is how private universities, and increasingly, public ones, fund themselves: rich alumni who cherish the memories of their college days. That's why the Ivy League invented American football: to keep alumni vicariously engaged through feats of undergraduate strength, agility, and controlled violence. Today, football games at Penn State or Michigan or Alabama attract hundreds of thousands of fans; in American speech, state and "flagship" university are often synonymous. Colleges offer a compressed version of shared local or regional history in which even non-alumni can participate.

The Ivy League is the font of both modern liberal arts education and a studied irreverence that shapes mass culture. From Harvard came the film *Animal House* (1978), in which misfit fraternity brothers get revenge on the cool frat and the authoritarian dean. *Animal House* was the first film by *National Lampoon*, the comedy magazine started by alumni from Harvard's *Lampoon* (founded 1876). When George Pierce Baker, founder of university creative writing, started giving graduate classes in playmaking in 1905, he was only incorporating into the official curriculum what Harvard students had been do-

5 Here McGurl is summarizing the argument of Jon H. Roberts and James Turner in *The Sacred and Secular University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

6 Delbanco, *College*, 6.

ing for decades.[7] In *Animal House*, even the most delinquent frat-boy becomes a senator.

Harvard can stand in for one side of the story of American college; the other is best represented by the University of California system, in which McGurl taught while writing *The Program Era*. The architect of that system was chancellor Clark Kerr, who from 1958 to 1967 oversaw the expansion of the UC into a three-tiered structure of research universities, more numerous "state" universities, and transfer-oriented community colleges. This "multiversity," subsequently imitated by many states, was designed to reach diverse constituencies from its strategically located educational nodes.[8] Kerr was a professor of industrial relations, and his vision was to make universities serve the needs of the postwar economy.

Kerr's project depended on massive investment from federal and state governments. Mid-century social welfare programs—the Serviceman's Readjustment Act ("G.I. Bill") of 1944 and the Education Act of 1965—made it possible for unprecedented numbers of young Americans to pay for more school. The number of bachelor's degrees soared, from 186,500 in 1940 to over a million in 1989-1990.[9] The education boom gave poorer Americans access to college, and the economic boom meant there were jobs for them—some jobs in those expanding universities. The cultural impact of twenty-five years of mass higher education was vast, creating new scripts for middle-class lives, with "college" part of the story. When the withdrawal of government funds made college ever more expensive after the 1970s, those expectations made people more willing to take on debt.

After 1945, college, formerly the playground of the ruling class, became so central to the making and reading of American literature that it was oddly invisible. *The Program Era* finally placed that institution in the foreground, showing how the protocols of the creative writing workshop set the rules for good fiction. Writing programs fed the longing for creativity, self-expression, and craft in an economy dominated by corporate employment and fantasies of individual fulfillment. American writers did well in this system: never before

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7 For example, the Hasty Pudding Social Club, which tours nationally every year, started writing their own theatricals in 1882.

8 Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 136, quoted in McGurl, *Program Era*, 41.

9 Thomas D. Snyder, ed., "120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait," *National Center for Education Statistics* (January 1993), 83.

had they achieved such popular success and cultural consequence. College in *The Program Era* is a hegemonic institution whose normal functioning goes largely unquestioned. Reading it now, this picture is full of pathos.

Peak College

The term "Peak Oil" refers to the moment of maximum global oil production, after which production will permanently—because oil is a finite resource—decline.[10] The date of this peak may be uncertain, but governments are sure that its "economic, social, and political costs will be unprecedented."[11] The oil shocks of the 1970s that contributed to the current reign of permanent war and neoliberal austerity will look quaint by comparison. Unlike oil, higher education is, at least in theory, a renewable social resource, but the term "peak college" captures certain affective parallels between oil and American Higher Ed in our time: the sense that their heyday has passed, that their future is ominous, and that what was once considered liquid gold might in fact be destructive.

There is evidence for the decline of college-assisted human capital extraction in the United States. Overall, college attainment rates have held pretty steady since the 1970s. According to 2018 data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 49.4 percent of American 25- to 34-year-olds have BAs, a modest increase from the 42.6 percent of their parents' generation (born between 1954 and 1963).[12] The real change has been elsewhere. American Baby Boomers lead their international peers: only Canada, Japan, and Finland had higher rates of tertiary education. By the time Millennials got to college, the United States had lost much of its competitive advantage, trailing the United Kingdom, Ireland, even Lithuania.

Beyond the bad numbers, the American romance of college is ending. As the first generation with outstanding student loans retires, or dies, no serious politician can deny the emergency around student debt in the United

10 R. L. Hirsch, Roger Bezdek, and Robert Wendling, "Peaking of World Oil Production: Impacts, Mitigation, & Risk Management," Science Applications International Corporation, US Department of Energy, National Energy Technology Laboratory, February 2005, 11.

11 Hirsch, Bezdek and Wendling, "Peaking," 4.

12 OECD, Population with tertiary education (indicator), 2020, https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/population-with-tertiary-education.htm.

States. In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, the liberal commentariat pondered the sorting of "college-educated" and "non-college-educated" voters into the Democratic and Republican parties. In the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primary, college remained a political issue, from charges that some candidates were unable to win a constituency beyond white, college-educated voters, to Bernie Sanders's promises of "Free College" and student debt relief.

This decline of faith in college has generated a string of laments and prescriptions about universities from within English Departments. Andrew Delbanco gives the Ivy League version of the lament in *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be* (2015). Delbanco, a Herman Melville scholar, studied at Harvard and has been teaching at Columbia since 1985. His book calls for the renewal of "democratic education": "At its core, a college should be a place where young people find help for navigating the territory between adolescence and adulthood. It should provide guidance, but not coercion, for students trying to cross that treacherous terrain on their way toward self-knowledge. It should help them develop certain qualities of mind and heart requisite for reflective citizenship."[13] These are noble ideas, but Delbanco is describing not democracy, but meritocracy: the rule of the smart and the putatively just.

Christopher Newfield, who teaches at UC Santa Barbara, offers a more expansive account of the crisis in his trilogy on the corporatization of higher education. Newfield calls on government and his fellow citizens to understand universities once again as a public good, and to fund them accordingly. His colleague Joshua Clover, a poet and critical theorist over at UC Davis, points out that the crisis is not solely one of values, but of political economy. With the exception of a mini-boom in the late 1990s (when McGurl was finishing graduate school), the best year of economic growth after 1973 has been worse than the worst year of growth in the postwar period.[14] The response from both Republican and Democratic administrations has been austerity, with devastating effects on the UC system. Despite California being richer than many countries, the state has cut investment in higher education more than fifty

13 Delbanco, *College*, 7; 3.

14 Robert Brenner cited in Joshua Clover, "Who Can Save the University?," *Public Books* (blog), June 12, 2017, https://www.publicbooks.org/who-can-save-the-university/.

percent since the 1980s, resulting in massive tuition hikes and plummeting completion rates.[15]

Universities, according to Clover, followed the same formula as other organizations in this period, reducing labor costs through automation and other "efficiencies," including paying workers less for the same work, and "accelerating throughput, the velocity with which goods fly through the production process."[16] This has meant making classes bigger, putting more courses online, expanding the duties of teachers, hiring adjuncts, attacking unions, and "simplifying" degree requirements. The problem is that it doesn't really work. Student "throughput" suffers in an austerity regime. The bigger and more impersonal the class, the less likely students are to pass it. And cutting classes means that students can't accumulate the prerequisites they need to complete their degree. Even if they manage to get a degree, students today leave public universities and community colleges with inadequate skills and mountains of debt.

Delbanco's book is from 2015, and Newfield's latest is from 2016. When the *Program Era* appeared in 2009, the full ravages of the financial crisis had not yet made their way through universities. But in English Departments, undergraduate enrollment numbers had been falling for a long time, and the discipline was in an identity crisis.[17] In the same year *The Program Era* was published, the fall cover story of *The American Scholar* was a jeremiad by former university president and modernism scholar William M. Chace. Though he acknowledged the economic and demographic causes of falling enrollments, Chace blamed his colleagues for failing "to champion, with passion, the books they teach and to make a strong case to undergraduates that the knowledge of those books and the tradition in which they exist is a human good in and of itself."[18]

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15 Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 12–13.

16 Clover, "Who Can Save the University?"

17 Bachelor's degree completions in English dropped 20.4% from 2012 and 2016. In terms of "market share," English has been in decline since 1993. See "A Changing Major: The Report of the 2016–17 ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major," *Association of Departments of English* (July 2018), 49.

18 William M. Chace, "The Decline of the English Department," *The American Scholar*, September 1, 2009, https://theamericanscholar.org/the-decline-of-the-english-department/.

A few years earlier, the French sociologist Bruno Latour asked, in *Critical Inquiry*, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" It seemed to Latour that the English Department had been *too* successful: arcane knowledge once confined to the academy—deconstruction, discourse analysis, ideology critique—had diffused into both common speech and state agencies. In this era of "instant revisionism," Jean Baudrillard could write that the Twin Towers collapsed of their own weight, and both Fox News and the Internet rabble would agree.[19] As an alternative to the iconoclasm of critique, Latour called for "a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence."[20] Chace and Latour are very different scholars, but their visions are complementary: one is nostalgic for the days before "theory," the other welcomes a post-theory future. Chace even verges into scientism, imagining teachers and students in a revived discipline, "partly aesthetic and partly detective-like … like young scientists teaming together with older scientists at the same workbench."[21]

In other words, the future must be both interdisciplinary and collective in spirit. It can be theoretically sophisticated, but it should have a care for the stuff people love. This is a pretty good description of *The Program Era*. One might expect an account of postwar fiction set in the American university to shatter our illusions of creative autonomy and individual excellence. But McGurl interrogated these values only in the interest of "restoring some balance in favor of the claims of the collective life we live through institutions" (21). *The Program Era* was a light at the end of the English Department's gloomy tunnel. By illuminating the university's role in building up a newly diverse canon beloved by student readers, it restored our appreciation of the university as laudable humanistic enterprise and added new fuel to the tank of literary historical method.

Or that's what I believed when I read it in the second year of my PhD. *The Program Era* appealed to me, a trainee in professional literary studies, because it married two powerful and sometimes conflicting traditions in the field: the careful analysis of how canonical literary works hang together formally (call

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19 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 228.

20 Latour, "Critique," 246.

21 Chace, "The Decline."

it “close reading”) and historical materialism, the analysis of how transformations in the mode of production drive cultural change. This marriage is accomplished through what McGurl terms “an unfamiliar, because non-individualistic, mode of aesthetic appreciation,” the object of which is not a single novel, but rather “the system as a whole” (xi). The idea that unromantic bureaucracies like the postwar university could be beautiful, and worthy of loving examination, was comforting in a time of cascading institutional crises.

McGurl’s method isn’t exactly new. He credits his understanding of the “totality” to Fredric Jameson, the Marxist literary scholar and author of *The Political Unconscious* (1981)—undergraduate Mark wrote his BA thesis on Jameson and J.M. Coetzee back in 1989. At Johns Hopkins, McGurl studied with Walter Benn Michaels, a founder of the New Historicism. Michaels’s other graduate students, in those same years, were writing about how the welfare state, the Democratic Party, and the free market shaped American literature.[22] By the 2000s, this combination of politico-economic rigor and interpretive virtuosity was the dominant mode in the field. But in *The Program Era*, self-reflexivity reached new heights: McGurl was writing about the institution where most of his readers sat. Rather than an Ivory Tower, the university was a white-collar workplace. Fiction writers and scholars, while *excellent*, were still ordinary Americans, human beings more like us than unlike us.

McGurl told a story about the university as an integrative engine of aesthetic excellence. That is, the postwar university epitomized a relatively organic relationship between economy and culture: “insofar as American culture is a corporate culture, the rhetoric of excellence could be understood as a deep expression of that national culture” (407). In 2009, the book could still end on a note of “strategic triumphalism” (409), claiming that the ideology of excellence “seems for now to be holding educational institutions together fairly well” (407). But the conditions that made *The Program Era* possible—that is, the tail end of the Program Era itself—are increasingly rare in American universities. When I was a graduate student, the university police smashed the tent city in Harvard Yard, bringing the local Occupy movement to a violent end. A few years later, the graduate students unionized, and in 2019 they held

22 Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) and *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Michael Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

their first strike. A week before I wrote this sentence, UC Santa Cruz fired 54 graduate student strikers.[23] If *The Program Era* were written today, it would inevitably sound different.[24]

Like the late modernist novels it elucidates, *The Program Era* is mimetic as well as descriptive. The book is, in its own vocabulary, an example of *autopoiesis*: the system telling its own story in terms that help sustain it. It thus partakes of the limitations it describes. What were the canons, rituals, hierarchies, and opportunities of the system in which *The Program Era* was nurtured? The culture of academic training was highly competitive and stratified. PhDs from the top programs filled the top two tiers of jobs, resulting in a kind of trickle-down excellence: public university professors had expectations for themselves and their students that were sometimes at cross-purposes to the priorities of state governments. In the "up or out" tenure-track model, assistant professors had to produce at least one monograph with a top university press, or they were consigned to the academic scrapheap. Meanwhile, more and more of the teaching was done by adjuncts, majority female, paid subminimum wages.

This all seems obvious now, and it produces a certain dissonance in the reading experience. "Museless pedants," McGurl calls literary scholars as a class, including himself and the reader (27), but the self-deprecation no longer welcomes a young scholar into that class; it only pronounces a class divide. He writes brilliantly about shame and art—about how our worldly efforts at art and love are subject to "the mortified recoil of shame" (335); about shame as the ultimate social emotion, a form of negative feedback from the system, self-reflexivity gone toxic (285)—but what about shame and precarity?

The Platform Era

If *The Program Era* reads differently now, it nonetheless gives us some powerful conceptual tools for understanding the cultural system after Peak College.

23 Vivian Ho, "UC Santa Cruz Fires 54 Graduate Students Participating in Months-Long Strike," *The Guardian*, February 29, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/28/university-of-california-student-strike-fired.

24 For a less sanguine analysis of literary institutionality, see Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," *Boundary* 2 41, no. 3 (2014): 27–54.

Consider the private monopolies of hyper-mediated sociability that flourish in the wake of governmental dis-investment from public goods like the university system. Many of those monopolies' "platforms," through which users' data and attention are sold to advertisers, were created in the dorm rooms of Peak College. It is part of the mythology of our time. In addition to the famous Mark Zuckerberg example, Reddit was made by roommates at the University of Virginia in 2005, and Snapchat was the brainchild of Stanford students. But the baby billionaires of Silicon Valley—many of whom never deigned to graduate—are mere symptoms of a systematic interconnectedness of college and cultural marketplace today.

Web 2.0—associated with slick new interfaces for social media and online commerce—has democratized cultural production on a scale that dwarfs the ambitions of mid-century mass higher education. Not to be outdone, universities become content producers, selling Massive Open Online Courses ("MOOCs") to online masses craving knowledge or sophisticated entertainment. To be sure, universities have always done mass culture. In 1909, Harvard's President Charles William Eliot said that anybody could obtain a liberal education by reading for 15-minutes a day from works that would fit on a five-foot shelf. The publisher Collier and Son saw a business opportunity, and *Harvard Classics*, or "Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf," was born. The Book-of-the-Month Club also has an Ivy-league pedigree.[25] Critics and scholars have called these ivory tower incursions into mass-culture "the middlebrow," and MOOCs, among other things, belong in this tradition.

The Program Era's charming, general-public-facing narrator might also belong in this tradition. Harvard University Press is an aggressive seeker of scholarly manuscripts with potential mass-market appeal, and Harvard's faculty often writes for the reading class. Elite universities' orientation toward the public sphere is best described as "uplifting," uplift being the gently entertaining cultural complement to technocratic social control. It is not surprising that the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primary included a Harvard College graduate who reads Norwegian and a Harvard Law School professor with "a plan" and a selfie line, both of whom present themselves as Heartland authentics who can fix a broken Washington.

Middlebrow politics is partly a response to mass politics. McGurl would have us think dialectically about this opposition: "independent" media turn

25 Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 98 and passim.

out to be no less dependent on the protocols of the university than are the efforts of middlebrow professors. Harvard shaped both Mayor Pete Buttigieg and *Current Affairs*, the independent left magazine that dismissed Buttigieg as a pseudo-progressive, McKinsey-generated SIMs character, "optimizing [the] candidate attribute matrix for maximal cross-national vote share."[26] Countless podcasts, including that of *Current Affairs*, take the form of a "hangout," not only because that format can be made cheaply and fast by aspiring podrepreneurs, but also because it resembles beer-soaked conversations you're supposed to have had late at night in your college dorm room. The Program Era produced *Animal House*; Peak College has *Chapo Trap House*, in which five millennial socialists drink, vape, and talk shit about liberals from Brooklyn. This informal parasociality around politics appeals to a generation that is debt-burdened, underemployed, depressed, and longing for community.

The Program Era helps us trace the way "college" continues to shape the cultural system today, from platforms to podcasts. But the social form it centers—the creative writing workshop—might be less important now than the ones it doesn't mention: the picket line where graduate students stand with cafeteria workers, the union, the late-night dorm room confab. What once seemed a prescient elegy-in-advance for the system that made me what I am, now seems ideologically dated and limited in scope. I say this not with triumph, but with melancholy.

To put it bluntly, no pedant in my generation can afford to be museless. My fellow Americanists of the Harvard English Department, who wrote McGurl-inspired dissertations—well-wrought literary histories of glossy magazines or writers' colonies or the National Endowment for the Arts—now work in other fields: journalism, university administration, consulting. Of those who stayed in academia, not one is on the tenure track, and while teaching academic writing or hopping between Visiting Assistant Professorships, they write reviews for magazines, or start podcasts, or compose viral tweets and Instagram performance art. As American universities become ever more indistinguishable from globalization's mediascapes and exploitive labor practices, studying them as an autonomous space of literary production seems quaint, if not quietist.

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26 Nathan J. Robinson, "All About Pete," *Current Affairs*, March 29, 2019, https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/03/all-about-pete.

Solidarity for Miles

Institutions of higher education may have a different function and a different potential now. The resurgence of labor organizing among public school teachers and graduate students suggests that schools are not only sites of mass education and literary conditioning, but also, as Raymond Williams wrote of the city and factory, sites of political "massing."[27] After generations of organizing efforts, my cohort of graduate students managed to unionize a string of private universities. Some of them see universities not as systems through which subjects negotiate their individual performances of excellence, but rather as a workplace where teachers, nurses, custodians, and food service workers are under the same roof, and might be brought to a level of proletarian consciousness once associated with steel mills and auto plants.[28]

There are no picket lines in *The Program Era*, and the subject of groups brings out some of its most clinical language. Philip Roth's self-reflexive autofiction is revealed to be "a trans-individual enterprise" (54). "Collective struggle," though named at the end of the introduction, appears only in the weak sense of the simultaneous, mass adaptation of individual organisms to the system. From Olympian heights, the literary systems theorist watches the ants' progress, which can be "experienced as beautiful" (74). Aesthetic appreciation of the system as a whole tends to render the system static. The forms of solidarity that could potentially disrupt the system—mutual recognition of class interests, commitment to comrades, defining an "us" that can fight against a "them"—are absent.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, *The Program Era* anticipates this criticism. McGurl knows there are limitations to his focus on individual and system, to the exclusion of the stuff in between. The book ends by contemplating problems of scale in cultural scholarship through a reading of the novel *Mr. Spaceman* (2000) by Florida State University's chair of creative writing Robert Olen Butler. An alien named Desi transports a bus-full of diverse individuals to the dock of his spaceship, brings them into a trance, and has them narrate the deep, meaningful stuff of their lives: the "traumatic events that made them *who they are*" (386–387). The spaceship's quasi-therapeutic workshop is a mirror of the creative writing classroom in the pluralist American university,

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27 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (Edinburgh: Penguin, 1961), 287.

28 See for example Gabe Winant, "Who Works for the Workers?," *n+1*, August 3, 2016, https://nplusonemag.com/issue-26/essays/who-works-for-the-workers/.

"with its familiar protocols of diversity and the proportional representation of identities" (388). Institutional allegory at its most obvious.

Less obvious, and most interesting to me, is the hovering sense that McGurl wonders if *he* is Desi/Butler: "Butler's Desi is a dream dreamed by a man of the system, and indeed could be said to personify himself *as* that system" (393). Does the author of *The Program Era*, who dives into the semi-conscious longings of a full syllabus of writers, fear himself to be a hairless grey-green alien with big eyes and brain and a disappearing body (393)? The problem with Desi is that his universalism is provincial. He may be "a personification of the global information economy," but for all his cosmic distance, "Desi sees only America" (395). To escape this provincialism, McGurl turns to Octavia Butler, whose popular space fiction defies the parochial pluralism of the program and reaches a "*transplanetary* perspective": an anti-nostalgic, posthuman vision of species survival that requires openness to true otherness; that is, hybrid breeding with alien slugs (397).

Having zoomed out past the solar system, and past the "high" literary to genre fiction, McGurl ends on a note of humility.

> It might finally be even simpler than that. To perform in the world is to say "I am," and to say "I am" is the most essential motive of every human performance, no matter how mundane. As an exercise of the imagination, creative writing supplies a special effect of personal agency in that performance, a way of saying not only "I am" but "I am whoever I want to be," which unfortunately I am not. (398)

Who would the narrator of *The Program Era* be, if he could be anybody? A queer, dyslexic black woman, who self-identified as a hermit, had a brilliant career as a science-fiction writer, and died of a stroke at 58? Perhaps not, but his more recent work on posthumanism, digital humanities, and Amazon indicates a persistent preoccupation with questions of scale. The subject of *The Program Era* is both all of modernity and a small corner of postwar literary history, from the perspective of a museless pedant in the English Department. The book knows this about itself, so my effort to tether it back to its own temporally- and spatially-limited conditions of possibility has been less critique than tribute, a lesson well-learned about the collective life we live together through institutions: that life will change.