

BEYOND “ACADEMICIZATION”: THE POSTWAR AMERICAN UNIVERSITY AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY*

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I

The still astonishing expansion of the American university since World War II has transformed the nation’s intellectual and cultural life in myriad ways. Most intellectual historians familiar with this period would agree, I suppose, that among the conspicuous changes is the sheer increase in the size and diversity of intellectual and cultural activity taking place on campuses across the country. After all, we know that colleges and universities that employ us also provide full- and part-time academic appointments to novelists, poets, playwrights, filmmakers, choreographers, composers, classical and jazz musicians, painters, photographers, and sculptors, even though most of them probably began their careers with little or no desire to join us in the halls of academe. This now widespread employment practice has decentralized the nation’s literary and artistic talent. It also has made for a manifold increase in degree-granting programs in writing and the creative arts. One example will suffice here. When World War II ended, there were a small handful of university-based creative-writing programs. Over the course of the next thirty years, the number increased to fifty-two. By 1985, there were some 150 graduate degree programs offering an MA, MFA, or PhD. As of 2004, there were more than 350 creative-writing programs in the United States, all staffed by practicing writers and poets, many of whom now also hold advanced degrees in creative writing. (If one includes current undergraduate degree programs, the number grows to 720.)

The university has become the principal site of American literary and artistic life in another way. With the decline of independent literary and artistic life in

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big cities, dozens of university towns such as Cambridge, Amherst, Ann Arbor, Madison, Austin, and Berkeley have emerged as artificial Sohos, prosperous cosmopolitan centers where traditional academic inquiry and new and alternative forms of cultural life flourish side by side. Add to all this countless website and blogs dedicated to the doings of professional academics and university-employed writers and artists, and what intellectual historian asked to give an honest assessment of where things stand would hesitate to say that the nation's intellectual and cultural life is in many respects remarkably healthy—perhaps even healthier than it has ever been—and that we have the American university to thank for much of what makes this so?

The postwar American university's embrace of writers and creative artists is not entirely unprecedented. Literary historians usually identify Robert Frost as our first true visiting "writer-in-residence," a position he held at various times and in various ways at Amherst, Middlebury, and the University of Michigan between 1916 and 1963. Pride of place here, however, arguably goes to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was appointed to the Harvard faculty as a visiting lecturer by Charles W. Eliot in the summer of 1870, and again in the winter of 1870–71. Whatever the date of the first embrace, there is no question it remained an occasional and informal practice until the end of World War II, and then gradually—and quite unexpectedly—became a regular way of life. Or as Mark McGurl puts in more precisely at the outset of his brilliant study of the rise of creative-writing programs, the gradual and widespread conjoining of the activities of writers and other creative artists and university teaching in the postwar era is—both in the enormous scale of academic program-building upon which it depended, and in the striking reversal of attitudes it entailed—about as close to a genuine cultural innovation as one could ever hope to see. Sixty years ago, the American university was perceived as an opponent of modernist experiments in literature and the arts, and therefore the last place any self-respecting writer or artist would want to work, or be welcome to ply his trade. Today, with the rise of academic programs and faculty chairs in almost all varieties of literary and artistic work, one could say that American colleges and universities are, collectively, the single most important source of support for serious and literary and artistic practice in the United States.¹ Put more flatly, the American university system today is the main economic lifeline for countless literary and artistic careers, as well as home to programs in writing and the creative arts that are getting more numerous and more popular every year.

¹ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 21–2. Subsequent page references are given in parentheses in the text.

One might imagine that the causes and consequences of this broad-based flowering of literary and artistic life within American higher education would long since have attracted considerable attention from intellectual historians, and not just because many of us have been on hand to observe it happening at close range. For if we still want to say that the primary purpose of universities is to assemble positive knowledge of the world and how it works, it is by no means obvious why they should make so much institutional space available for the literary and creative arts. Has there been a fundamental change in our understanding what universities are supposed to do? Does the change represent progress?

To be sure, intellectual historians writing about the postwar American university have had no trouble in seeing that, by the mid-1980s, all roads in the nation’s intellectual and cultural life seemed to lead to the university. But a number of influential voices have not liked what they have seen. Serious discussion of the university’s role as the primary supporter of the nation’s arts and ideas has been confined largely to the question whether the new arrangement has benefited or harmed what remains of intellectual and cultural work being done outside the academy. And the obviously unhappy sentiment running throughout most of the discussion is that there has been something inherently wrong with so much of our intellectual and cultural work being—in a neologism routinely employed to characterize what has happened—“academicized” in such a way. If all roads lead into the university, apparently almost none lead out. So the remarkable increase in the scale and variety of literary and artistic activity taking place on campuses at best represents an ambiguous success.

The lament about the “academicization” of the nation’s intellectual life dates back to the beginning of the postwar era, when the widely read Harvard committee report *General Education in a Free Society* (1945) warned against giving free rein to academic “specialism” in undergraduate teaching. But it is probably Russell Jacoby’s *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*, published to widespread acclaim in 1987, that contains the best-known criticism of the postwar American university as a devouring juggernaut of “academicization.” The heart of Jacoby’s complaint was that as more and more American intellectuals became academics after World War II, they “had no need to write a public prose; they did not; and finally could not.” An irony also colored his sustained lament, since in his view the full weight of “academicization” hit a generation of American intellectuals who had come of age during the upheavals of the 1960s. How was it possible, Jacoby asked, that veterans of student movements that often “targeted the university, derided their teachers, and ridiculed past thinkers” had matured into such earnest and quiet professional academics? His answer was that they had little choice. For when the smoke of the 1960s cleared, American universities “virtually monopolized intellectual work, and intellectual life outside the campuses seemed quixotic” (7–8). As result, many young would-be

intellectuals had never left school; others discovered there was nowhere else to go. By the mid-1980s, Jacoby concluded, almost all serious American thinkers were flocking to the universities, where internecine conflicts over the curriculum loomed larger than once more pressing problems in American society at large.

That same year, Thomas Bender, in *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City from 1750 to the Beginning of Our Own Time*, also gave a thumbs-down to the dominant role universities had come to play in the nation's intellectual and cultural life. In the book's Epilogue, Bender argued that while admirably guided from its inception by a metropolitan cultural ideal, New York City had been "deeply damaged" in the 1960s when the nation's universities, "flush with money, bought up not only intellectuals and writers, but painters, choreographers, and composers as well." Bender acknowledged that university employment has helped to provide regular salaries for literary and artistic talent, as well as to spread it across the country. But such positive changes have not offset the serious damage done by universities in rendering literary and artistic work the subject matter of theoretical, self-referential academic study, and thereby undermining their association with the once more open and vital culture of large cities such as New York. Like Jacoby, Bender also believed that by the mid-1980s the principal categories of American intellectual life had become "academic rather than urban." In his view, however, a change clearly evident in literary life was now also apparent in "much self-consciously post-modernist writing, poetry, dance, and architecture." So Bender's conclusion was even gloomier than Jacoby's: widespread "academicization" of the nation's intellectual and artistic life had "terribly reduced" the range and significance of both art and ideas in American society at large.

In this essay, I want to set my reactions to three recently published books on the American university against the background of this disenchanting historiography. I also want to consider how they might provide guidance for intellectual historians who believe it is time for us to move beyond the lament about "academicization." Jacoby, Bender, and others have asked, is the dominant role the American university has come to play in the nation's intellectual and cultural life a good or a bad thing? There is, of course, nothing wrong raising this question. The flaw is that talk of "academicization" makes the outcome of discussion all too predictable, because "academicization" is not a category of evaluation, but a stigmatizing label. The neologism "to academicize" means to reduce a subject to a rigid set of rules, principles, and precepts. So if one wants to say that the university has "academicized" art and ideas, one can only mean the university has enclosed them and drained them of vitality. There is no way of refuting the charge of "academicization." Not just the postwar American university, but apparently anyone intent on doing serious "academic" work in literature or the arts, stands hopelessly condemned in advance.

If we study history only to be disillusioned, one could say that much of the job has been done for the postwar American university. But surely intellectual

historians can do more than wring their hands here. I would suggest this as a first step. Take the vast increase in the intellectual and cultural resources of America's colleges and universities not as an occasion for celebration or condemnation, but as an established and complicated historical fact still in need of documentation and interpretation. Because each book under review here sheds different light on how we might go about developing this approach, I will consider each in turn and on its own terms. But an interest in suggesting some new and more sympathetic ways of placing the university in the intellectual and cultural history of postwar America frames my comments. How, why, and to what end has the academy become the center of the nation's intellectual and cultural life? What information and interpretive framework would allow us to explore this question without assuming at the start that we are discussing a change whose only possible consequence is to "terribly reduce" the range and significance of ideas and art in society at large? Finally, I also want to suggest that however future intellectual historians choose to explain what caused the postwar American university to gain such a dominant position in our intellectual and cultural affairs, they should also highlight and explain the fact that the consequences of this change have been many-sided. What we need to come to terms with, in other words, is not a one-dimensional "academicization" of serious intellectual and cultural work, but its astonishing proliferation. The dirty secret of postwar American intellectual history, if you will, is not that our colleges and universities have reduced the nation's art and ideas to a rigid set of academic rules and principles. Rather, they have been, collectively, the source of more art and ideas than anyone can possibly take in. What, then, should intellectual historians do when they write about the postwar American university with these considerations in mind?

II

One plausible answer would be to start where Wilson Smith and Thomas Bender start in their fine introduction to the anthology of documents they gather in *American Higher Education Transformed, 1940–2005*: by underlining the fact that, in addition to assuming a dominant role in the nation's intellectual and cultural life, the American university experienced so many other substantial changes during the postwar era that it became "a wholly new institution" (1), one both qualitatively and quantitatively different from that of the first half of the century.² In 172 selections, Smith and Bender document much of this sweeping

² Wilson Smith and Thomas Bender, eds., *American Higher Education Transformed, 1940–2005* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). Page references are given in parentheses in the text.

transformation by stressing changes in the curriculum and the ideal of liberal learning in an age of mass education; the position and leadership of universities in American society; the powerful new role of the federal government, including its courts; and postwar academic life as a profession. The years immediately after World War II are illuminated by selections from a series of reports—beginning with the Harvard report *General Education in a Free Society* (1945)—that addressed pressing issues at every level of the educational system, and also provided the academic community with distinguished, if sometimes conflicting, advice on how to proceed. Intellectual historians who study American thought and culture in the 1960s should welcome this volume's generous supply of documents illustrating heated campus controversies of that decade, especially the text of Richard Hofstadter's anguished defense of the university in his commencement address at Columbia in the troubled spring of 1968. *American Higher Education Transformed* also provides a selection of Supreme Court decisions that trace the evolution of the concept of academic freedom in the 1950s and 1960s. As with the other selections in this volume, here they continue work that Wilson Smith began with Hofstadter almost fifty years ago in their still invaluable two-volume *American Higher Education: A Documentary History* (1961). The last word in this new anthology is left for speeches and essays of college and university presidents who distinguished themselves in various ways during the 1980s and 1990s.

The selections in *American Higher Education Transformed* are not arranged chronologically, but under thirteen topical headings. Each section is provided with a short historical introduction, and each document with an abbreviated guide to relevant bibliographical material. Unfortunately, this volume does not come with a conventional detailed index of authors, subjects, titles, and instructors. It ends instead with a bare-bones, one-page concordance of its major subjects that, I fear, may limit this anthology's usefulness.

American Higher Education Transformed contains a rich and valuable sampling of sixty years of a huge literature of controversy and discussion. But like every anthology it also raises expectations that are not, and perhaps unavoidably cannot, be met. Because Smith and Bender focus on the efforts of people who had a direct hand in transforming postwar American higher education, they must overlook people not involved in such work. But we know that important changes in this period at times were driven by interested parties outside the university. An important case in point here would be Lewis Powell, whose widely circulated 1971 memorandum to the US Chamber of Commerce, "Attack on the American Free Enterprise System," did not find its way into this anthology. Soon to be a Supreme Court justice, Powell urged American corporate leaders to retake command of public discourse by financing new conservative think tanks, reshaping mass media, and seeking to influence appointments in the universities

and the courts—all of which in fact would happen in the decades that followed, and in turn helped to fuel, the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s.³

Smith and Bender make it clear at the outset that they have excluded the social life of students, the business of intercollegiate athletics, and institutional budgets in favor of questions of access, the diversity of students, and their studies and their place in educational change. Omission of these issues, of course, is what makes space for the other material. But it does so at the risk of drawing attention away from what some would say now stand among the most pressing issues in American higher education.

At all levels, for example, tuition has increased far beyond any measure of inflation—currently to above \$37,000 at elite institutions and exponentially at formerly inexpensive state universities. Among the consequences is that, in the year 2000, a typical graduating student received not only her degree but a paper book for a debt of \$18,000, a debt which was twice what it had been in 1992 and still continues to climb.

It should be said, too, that *American Higher Education Transformed* will not allow its readers to explore the complicated question of “diversity” in all of its dimensions. It is safe to say that when the intellectual history of the American university during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is written, the incessant and perhaps promiscuous use of the word “diversity” will stand out as one of its most salient features. But talk about “diversity” in American higher education is hardly a new thing. In national debates of the late 1940s, no premise was more widely accepted by leaders in academia and government than the importance of preserving functional diversity among institutions. Institutional variety—colleges and universities existing primarily to serve local and regional needs rather than a national culture—was seen as an academic characteristic essential to the proper functioning of democracy.

“Diversity,” of course, remains a sacred concept in American higher education. But during the last decades of the twentieth century, it came to mean something rather different: essentially, faculty and students of different ethno-racial and economic backgrounds, who have needs, skills, and interests more heterogeneous than in the immediate postwar era. This change also has made for a paradox that goes unnoticed in *American Higher Education Transformed*: a decline in institutional diversity among our leading colleges and universities. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the student population served by these institutions certainly has become more diverse and the societal purposes they

³ For a thoughtful discussion of the background and significance of Powell’s memorandum see David Hollinger, *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity: Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious, and Professional Affiliation in the United States* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), chap. 4.

pursue remarkably more varied. But there also is no question that these same institutions have come to look more and more alike in their programs, their faculties, their finances, their organization, and their conception of institutional purpose.⁴

There are some other important blank spots in this anthology. Is it providing a documentary history of American higher education in the late twentieth century when it barely touches on the nationwide controversy over academic tenure that was reignited in the 1990s? Should the peculiarities of the American system of academic governance—nowhere outside the United States and Canada—are modern universities still governed by boards of laymen—be ignored? Why are there no selections to illustrate how changes in the postwar American system of higher education compare to changes in national systems elsewhere? To raise these questions, I hasten to add, is not to make a serious criticism of a volume that is unavoidably limited in its reach, but simply to remind intellectual historians that the changes that reshaped the American university since World War II have been vast and complicated, and require more systematic study than we have given them to date.

III

Louis Menand's name would sit high atop any informed observer's list of people who have made important contributions to national discourse about the current condition of the American university. Since the early 1990s, he has produced a steady stream of lucid and pungent essays that have addressed some of the most highly charged academic issues of our time. Because his work has appeared regularly in publications such as the *New York Times Magazine*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Republic*, and the *New Yorker*, his views also have been widely circulated. It is no surprise, then, to find one of his most provocative essays—a 1996 *New York Times Magazine* article arguing that our current time-consuming and costly system of graduate education would immediately gain greater efficiency and focus if we reduced all PhD programs to three years, with no teaching or PhD dissertation—reprinted in *American Higher Education Transformed*.

The word “academicization” never appears in that piece, nor does it in the essays Menand has revised and expanded for publication in *The Marketplace of Ideas*.⁵ But I think it fair to use it as a shorthand description of what bothers

⁴ This is one of the central themes in Richard M. Freeland's invaluable *Academia's Golden Age: Universities in Massachusetts, 1945–70* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁵ Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010). Page references are given in parentheses in the text.

him about the American university. For on my reading, what Menand has been saying in one essay after another for almost two decades now—and what he repeats and extends in *The Marketplace of Ideas*—is that the main problem with the university is a lack of creativity and imagination that we can blame largely on a rigid and antiquated set of rules, principles, and precepts that guide the workings of professional academic disciplines.

Consider his answers to the four questions he takes up in *The Marketplace of Ideas*. Why is it so hard for liberal arts colleges to decide which subjects their students should be required to study? Answer: because any effort to establish robust general education programs automatically triggers effective resistance from a liberal-arts “autoimmune system” (43) designed to reproduce and sustain professional academic specialists. General education programs try to connect what undergraduates learn with the world outside the academy. Within the academy, however, most professors see their teaching as a matter of disseminating specialized academic knowledge that has no immediate practical application. For them, the serious work of teaching is done entirely inside separate departments, where an undergraduate major is viewed as preparation for graduate work in the same field, work which in turn will lead to specialized faculty appointments.

Why did academic disciplines in the humanities undergo a crisis of legitimacy in the 1980s and 1990s? Answer: they were victims of an understandable backlash against the exaggerated respect given to humanities disciplines during the immediate postwar decades. The backlash began in the 1980s with English and philosophy professors who proclaimed the arbitrariness of disciplinary boundaries and chose to work in a more interdisciplinary manner. Things got worse in the 1990s when scholars who initially seemed bent only on uncovering the guiding assumptions of their disciplines began to insist that disciplinarity itself was the main roadblock. In the institutional meltdown that followed, Menand tells us, the humanities disciplines have not disappeared, but today the notion that they have some sort of objective referent can no longer be taken seriously.

Why has “interdisciplinarity” become a magic word in the academy in recent decades? Answer: it speaks to the widespread belief that one of the main reasons why the university is not working well is “the persistence of academic silos known as departments,” and that if colleges and universities could only get past “this outmoded dispensation, a lot of their problems would disappear” (95). Menand shares this belief. But he does not think “interdisciplinarity” is the way forward. In practice, “interdisciplinarity” serves only to ratify the disciplines, he argues, thereby leaving us with the very problem we want to get rid of, and this for the same reason that “general education” programs typically come to life as muddled compromises. Professional academicians are disciplinary specialists trained to respect the autonomy and expertise of professional academicians in other disciplines. As a result, they are almost never in a position to provide useful

evaluations of one another's claims. In a typical interdisciplinary encounter, they "just shout at each other from the mountaintop of their own discipline" (120–21).

And, finally, why are professors overwhelmingly mainstream liberals in their politics? Answer: it is not a matter of being trained in a way that converts them to liberal opinions; rather, university professors tend to think alike politically because the American academic profession has become "increasingly self-selected" (155). For more than four decades now, the main obstacles to a successful academic career in the liberal-arts disciplines have been a lengthy and expensive doctoral education process and a disastrous job market. College students who have some interest in further education, but are unsure whether they want careers as professors, Menand tells us, are not going to risk eight or more years finding out. The result has been "a narrowing of the intellectual range and diversity" of undergraduates entering the profession. Students who go to "graduate school already talk the talk, and they learn to walk the walk as well" (153), ultimately intent on joining an academic system whose primary purpose is not to assure that professors are liberals, so much as to fashion academic specialists more likely to identify with their disciplines than with their campuses and the world outside academia.

The Marketplace of Ideas addresses questions that, in Menand's view, tell us that the American university is in need of fundamental reform. He also finds them troubling, because he believes they speak to problems that it should be easy for universities to resolve. What makes all of them intractable, in Menand's view, is a rigid set rules and practices that govern the workings of professional academic disciplines that are housed in universities. From start to finish, *The Marketplace of Ideas* rehearses the familiar lament about "academicization."

How should an intellectual historian judge this book? The answer is complicated, partly because Menand is hard to categorize as an academic figure. An English professor by training, he says that for most of *The Marketplace of Ideas* he writes as a historian "whose emphasis is on the backstory of present problems" (19). He also says that the questions he addresses are "essentially intellectual matters, that should be amenable to debate and resolution. They are not, in any significant way, about money" (16). Perhaps. But there are reasons to wonder what Menand thinks he is doing when he writes about "essentially intellectual matters" within the American university. For all his emphasis on the primacy of ideas, it would not be fair to judge *The Marketplace of Ideas* as the work of a practicing intellectual historian. On my reading, the book is the handiwork of a skilled aphoristic essayist. For when it comes to the American university, Menand is a writer who favors compact arguments, and likes to cover a lot of ground very quickly. He also displays an exceptionally fluent generalizing power, and obviously believes he is telling his readers unpopular truths. That said, it is fair to ask if Menand has gotten the "backstory of present problems" right, because

his understanding of the “backstory” represents the novel feature of his rehearsal of the familiar lament about “academicization.” Or, more precisely, Menand believes that the best way for us to understand why the American university is currently hamstrung by professional academic disciplines is not to analyze what has happened to the disciplines since World War II, but to recall the central role they played in bringing the American university to life in the first place.

The gist of Menand’s “backstory” is that, during the last three decades of the nineteenth century, nearly every subject taught in American colleges and universities was equipped both with a new or refurbished professional disciplinary organization that was national in membership and specialized in scope, and with a new or modified departmental organization that quickly became the building block of most college and university administrations. These changes were more than formal rearrangements of the faculty, because all of them testified to the increasingly powerful hold of academic specialization in American higher education. And the hold was so powerful, Menand argues, that by the time World War I began, the nation’s academic life was restructured from top to bottom, with the professionalization of academic disciplines serving as the driving force behind all of the most important changes.

Why is this “backstory” important? Menand’s answer is straightforward: very little has changed at American colleges and universities since World War I, and that is what makes for our biggest problem. More precisely, while the four questions that trouble Menand arise from the way in which professional academic disciplines currently sustain and reproduce themselves, the single most significant fact about American higher education in his view is that its institutional structure has remained almost entirely unchanged since the First World War. Indeed, the entire current arrangement of departments and disciplines that form the building blocks of the modern American university can only be understood as “a late nineteenth-century system, put into place for late nineteenth-century reasons.” Menand acknowledges in passing that the university has changed in many ways during the postwar era. But unlike Wilson and Bender, he does not believe that the changes transformed it into a wholly new institution. Moreover, he also believes that, to the extent that this “late nineteenth-century system” still determines the workings of the modern American university, trying to reform it is like “trying to get on the Internet with a typewriter, or like riding a horse to the mall” (17).

Is all this true? Let’s start with Menand’s “backstory.” Twenty years ago, many intellectual historians did believe that the “professionalization” of academic life captured the primary mission of the American university movement.⁶ Today

⁶ The main source of Menand’s “backstory” is Walter Metzger, “The Academic Profession in the United States,” in Burton R. Clark, ed., *The Academic Profession: National, Disciplinary, and Institutional Settings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

many are not so sure. As is often the case with terms that are assigned integrating roles in historical narratives, scholars returning to the field in recent years have come to recognize what the architects of the American university understood at the outset: “professionalization” captures only some of the complex variety of developments that gave rise to the university. The phrase “organize it on a more professional and specialized basis” does describe part of what the university accomplished in reshaping American intellectual and cultural life before World War I. But we now know that academic professionalization during this period not only occurred at a ragged and uneven pace, it also took different and not mutually reinforcing forms.

Consider the case of the American Political Science Association (APSA). The primary aim of the figures who spearheaded the founding of the APSA—some fifty members of the American Historical Association (AHA) and the American Economic Association (AEA) who gathered in Tulane University’s Tilton Memorial Library on 30 December 1903—was to promote more systematic collection and exchange of information on legislation at the municipal, state, and national levels. The new association they established for this purpose, however, did not introduce any new set of rules or precepts for the “scientific” study of politics. Nor, for that matter, did it immediately inspire any significant growth of “political science” as an independent academic profession. Fewer than half of the fifty AHA and AEA members present at the founding signed up as charter members. Ten years later, it is true, the APSA’s membership had grown impressively to about fifteen hundred men and women. But of these only twenty percent identified themselves as professors or teachers. As with economics and history, it turns out that modern academic inquiry into politics was supported by institutional structures built well in advance of any substantial new base of specialized knowledge or academic methodology. Moreover, because this sequence of events reversed the pattern in the natural sciences, the professionalization of the social sciences was, by comparison, more deeply embedded in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century events.

Problems with Menand’s “backstory” make for problems with his account of our “present problems.” Not just the professionalization of academic life, he tells us, but “almost every aspect of higher education we are familiar with” dates back to what he calls the “big bang” (97) of American higher education, the period between 1870 and 1915. But this makes things much too simple. It may be true (although there are good reasons to doubt it) that some of our leading private colleges and universities have changed very little structurally since the late nineteenth century. But the transformation of American higher education after World War II did not simply strain an existing system. It so fundamentally altered things that it no longer makes sense to talk of American higher education as if it were a single system.

Anyone wanting to know how much the landscape has been transformed for the American professoriate, for example, would do well to pick up *American Higher Education Transformed* and go straight to Burton Clark's illuminating “Small Worlds, Different Worlds” (338–42). A sociologist who is longtime student of the academic profession, Clark acknowledges that self-amplifying disciplinary differences have come to play an important role in dividing the American professoriate. But he argues persuasively that “institutional differences” have come to play an even more important role. In 1995, this particular “axis of differentiation” placed roughly two-thirds of American academics in institutions other than that of doctoral-granting universities. About a fourth of total faculty were in colleges and universities that offered degree work as far as the master's; a small share, about 7 percent, were in liberal-arts colleges. The largest block—roughly one-third (over 250,000)—were employed in the nation's nearly 1,500 community colleges. Student numbers were even more telling. Doctoral-granting universities had just 26 percent of total enrollment; the master's level institutions, 21 percent; specialized institutions, 4 percent. Two-year community colleges had 43 percent—far and away the largest share; they also admitted over 50 percent of all entering students. One can only speculate what professional academics who have made their careers teaching in community colleges—and therefore have done most of the heavy lifting in postwar American higher education—would make of *The Marketplace of Ideas*. “This book is not talking about our world,” would not be a bad guess about their first response.

Like other writers who think of themselves as telling their readers unpopular truths, Menand too often closes himself off to the complexities of American higher education, both past and present. I doubt Menand really is dreaming about how the American university might work stripped of all its traditional liberal-arts disciplines. Doubtless he also knows that not all the problems confronting these disciplines are problems of their own making. In recent decades, other forces at play have included the surging growth of public higher education and the relatively slower growth of private colleges and universities. In fact, if it makes sense to talk of a “big bang” period in the history of American higher education, we have just gone through it, and it has taken a heavy toll on the liberal-arts disciplines.

Between 1972 and 2005, more young people entered American higher education than at any other time in the nation's history, and the vast majority of them—13 million of a total of 17.5 million—wound up in public colleges and universities, and the vast majority of these tended towards majors in managerial, technical, and preprofessional fields. One would never guess in reading *The Marketplace of Ideas* that, while public universities have an interest in teaching the liberal arts, their primary interest lies elsewhere: in research science, engineering, the health sciences, and applied disciplines such as agriculture,

veterinary medicine, and oceanography. At universities that still prize the traditional liberal-arts disciplines, they are in trouble for reasons not of their own making and arguably beyond their control. With tuition rising at three times the rate of inflation, and with consequent growth in debt after graduation, parents and college-age children have become anxious about the relative earning power of degrees in English, philosophy, foreign languages, art history, and kindred traditional academic fields, including history. On college and university campuses, as William Chace has pointed out, administrative efforts to exploit available resources to manage ever-growing costs have created a paradox. In recent decades, the preferred way to bring in more money, over and above tuition income, has been to hire more and more people who will assure a continuing flow of research dollars from government and corporate sources and attract private and philanthropic gifts. The upshot has been a significant expansion in the number of non-faculty staff—development officers, technical support staff, research assistants, lawyers attuned to federal regulations—as well as human-resources personnel to handle the ever-growing number of just such new employees. The paradox here is that while college and university staffs on the whole have grown substantially, the institutional presence and power of the faculty has been in relative decline.⁷ Seen against this background, Menand’s account of why the liberal-arts disciplines are in trouble looks like a case of blaming the victim.⁸

IV

The word “academicization” also never pops up in Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era*. But here again I think it fair to use it as a shorthand for a familiar and disparaging view of the university-based creative-writing programs that book

⁷ William M. Chace, “The Decline of the English Department,” *American Scholar* (Autumn, 2009), 34–8. For a more sustained critical discussion of the shortcomings of Menand’s view of the academic discipline, see Thomas Haskell, “Menand’s Postdisciplinary Project,” *Intellectual History Newsletter* 24 (2002), 107–19.

⁸ Menand also overlooks the fact that the trouble faced by liberal arts disciplines varies greatly among different segments of a highly stratified system of higher education. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, liberal-arts and sciences degrees increasingly have been concentrated in two elite segments of the system—research universities and top-tier liberal-arts colleges. Among other things, the change tells us that what was once a largely functional divide within the system—different kinds of institutions emphasizing different curricula—is now largely a status divide. For a thoughtful discussion of how this change has affected humanities disciplines, see Roger Geiger, “Demography and Curriculum: The Humanities in Higher Education from the 1950s through the 1980s,” in David A. Hollinger, ed., *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 50–72.

addresses—the essence of which is that they have occasioned a sad decline in the quality and interest of American fiction. I also think it fair to say that McGurl’s book not only refutes this view of creative-writing programs, it quite brilliantly turns it on its head. *The Program Era* offers students of postwar American literary and cultural history a great many other very interesting things as well, to be sure. In its pages, they will find vivid case studies of individual careers and texts of several of the leading MFA graduates of the postwar era, including Flannery O’Connor, Ken Kesey, Toni Morrison, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, and Sandra Cisneros; illuminating accounts of the nation’s leading writing programs, and of the different approaches they have taken in teaching writing; fascinating and related discussions of the creative-writing program as a medium of influence, a place where teachers exert themselves on students; and a provocative concluding discussion of evidence showing that, after standing alone as an American phenomenon for some fifty years, creative writing now seems on its way to becoming a globally anglophone phenomenon. But ultimately, for all its attention to individual writers and the internal workings of creative-writing programs, the organizing argument of *The Program Era* is that American colleges and universities have embraced American fiction not to coopt it or suffocate it, but instead to generate a complex and evolving constellation of aesthetic problems that have been explored with great energy—and sometimes brilliance—by a now long and growing list of writers who have also been students and teachers. Like Menand, McGurl also describes this constellation of problems in systematic terms. But where the academic system Menand uncovers is antiquated and lacking in creativity, the one McGurl reconstructs has been created in recent decades. In his view, it also has been generated not to produce another specialized academic discipline, so much as to spawn a great variety of new literary styles and to teach writers to make sense of at least two of the actual worlds that most of their readers inhabit—the world of mass higher education and the world of the white-collar workplace.⁹

All this makes for a complicated but also enormously provocative book. One of McGurl’s purposes is to show that the overriding problem for postwar American fiction has been to find new ways of adapting modernist principles, developed well outside the university in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to a literary field now largely dominated by the bureaucratic institutions of higher education. The signature preoccupation of modernist fiction with the technical

⁹ It is worth noting that Menand has written a long and glowing review of *The Program Era* that does the book much better service than I have space for here. Menand’s high praise is puzzling, however, given how completely McGurl’s book rejects his view of American higher education as a system lacking in creativity and imagination. See Louis Menand, “Show or Tell: Should Creative Writing Be Taught?,” *New Yorker*, 8 and 15 June 2009.

problem of the story narrator's "point of view" found new meaning after it was transferred to an academic environment engaged on many levels with the problems and promise of cultural diversity. But this is just one of several examples. McGurl wants to show us that postwar American fiction not only reflects the fact that America's colleges and universities are the places where most of the nation's serious writers are trained, but also reflects that fact in various ways, none of which can be said to have diminished its quality or interest.

With that end in mind, while McGurl offers us a number of close and vivid readings of careers and texts, he regularly circles back to the more ambitious task of sketching what he calls a "total" form of aesthetic appreciation designed to capture the importance of creative writing as the vital institutional setting within which postwar American fiction has been fashioned. Here his challenge is to generate an interpretive framework broad enough to describe an entire historical era, but also flexible enough to recognize that the phenomena it tries to capture were gradually assembled over several decades, and continue to change before our own eyes.

To sort things out, McGurl divides the chapters of *The Program Era* into three roughly chronological parts. The first tracks the gradual organization of the system as we know it across the first two-thirds of the twentieth century; the second studies the "upheaval and elasticity" of that system in what McGurl considers the pivotal period of the 1960s, when creative writing programs really began to multiply; the third analyzes its normal functioning since then. McGurl's effort to map the totality of postwar American fiction also has him breaking it down into three discrete but in practice overlapping aesthetic formations. The first is "techomodernism" (exemplified in fiction produced by John Barth and Thomas Pynchon), best understood as a tweaking of the term "postmodernism" in that it emphasizes the all-important engagement of postmodern literature with information technology. The second is "high cultural pluralism" (exemplified in the work of Philip Roth and Toni Morrison), which McGurl uses to describe a body of fiction that joins the high literary values of modernism with an interest in documenting the experience of cultural difference and the authenticity of the ethnic voice. The third is "lower-middle-class modernism" (exemplified in the fiction of Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates), which describes a large body of work—and some would say the most characteristic product of the writing program in recent decades—that usually takes the form of the minimalist short story, and is preoccupied more than anything else with economic insecurity and cultural anomie (31–2).

McGurl is quick to concede that these three "more or less barbarous neologisms" (32) are not native to the pedagogy of the creative writing and postwar fiction that they seek to describe. But there is no need for apology here. Neologisms or not, McGurl employs them skillfully in showing us how to resist

the impulse to lump all postwar American fiction into single category. And it is precisely here, I think, that he turns the lament about “academicization” on its head by organizing the university-based world of creative writing with what he employs as flexible and sympathetic categories of classification, not stigmatizing labels.

In showing us that the image of the American academic system as “a gray plane of deathly regularity is an outdated and impoverished one” (xi), McGurl tells the story of the rise of university-based creative writing with a density of detail and complexity of analysis that is truly remarkable. But there are some problems along the way. After four hundred pages, it is still hard to say precisely when and why writers became a welcome presence on campus. McGurl says that while only a small cluster of creative-writing programs were established in the immediate postwar period, the numbers “exploded” (20) with the progressive educational revival of the 1960s. But the numbers do not add up here. The Associated Writers Program (AWP) was founded in 1967 with just thirteen members. By 1975, membership had increased noticeably to fifty-two. But the real explosion in numbers clearly took place between 1975 and 2005: from fifty-two to more than 350. History, of course, is not chronology. But a more refined temporal articulation of the rise of creative writing invites a less sanguine reading of events than *The Program Era* provides. McGurl tends to see the rise of creative writing mostly against the background of the widespread good fortune experienced by American higher education in the quarter-century after World War II—a time when, as he puts it, “a sense of the comfortably absorptive largeness of a suddenly swollen faculty body would encourage the admission of a different and riskier sort of individual . . . into the usual mix of teacher–scholars” (114). But if the real boom in creative writing programs took place during the last quarter of the twentieth century, it occurred during a time when the job market for the “the usual mix of teacher–scholars” dried up. So more jobs in creative writing, it would seem, must have come at the expense of jobs for “the usual mix” of professional academics—and, it would be safe to guess, only rarely with their support.

There also are problems with what McGurl tells us about where the rise of creative writing stands among the many events that define the rise of the postwar American university. University-employed creative writers, he argues, contribute a new form of prestige to the modern American university’s “overall portfolio of cultural capital, adding their bit to the market value of degrees it confers.” In this role, they also resemble varsity athletes, “but whereas varsity athletics symbolize the excellence of competitive teamwork, creative writing and other arts testify to the institution’s systematic hospitality to the excellence of individual self-expression.” (408). I suppose the comparison is meant to flatter university-employed writers and artists, but it seems a bit far-fetched. As with the rise of big-time athletics—and big-time research science—creative-writing

programs were partly the products of changes in funding. But it would be a very big stretch to say that funding here has been generous. In fact, it looks like chump change when compared to what has been made available to athletes and their coaches. In 2006, the director of the AWP estimated that the total annual budget for all creative programs was roughly \$200 million. By contrast, during 2007–8, the budget for the athletics department at the University of Texas alone was \$107.6 million. At first glance, the huge increase in creative-writing programs during the last quarter of the twentieth century does suggest that universities believe they serve important purposes. Set alongside the university's commitments to big-time athletics and science, creative writing looks like little more than an inexpensive sideshow.

Finally, on this count, it also should be said that McGurl avoids more than passing mention of the fact that not all creative programs are created equal. Of necessity, perhaps, he focuses mostly on the impressive results of elite programs, most of which also turn out to be long-standing ventures. (The Iowa Writers Program was founded in 1936; the Stanford Creative Writing Program in 1945.) As a result, he has little to say about what some critics say is the real downside of "the program era." Not the 'academicization' of American fiction, so much as the likelihood that the academy has been generous to a fault in establishing creative-writing programs, and that programs at the bottom of end of the food chain too often house middling writers/professors who are rarely "academic" or rigorous in their teaching.

V

By way of a conclusion, I want to return to the question of how intellectual historians might develop a fresh and more sympathetic understanding of the dominant role the American university has come to play in the nation's intellectual and cultural affairs. At least three answers emerge from my reading of these books.

The first is the simplest, and perhaps the most important: make more effort to document what has happened within American colleges and universities during the postwar era. There has been no shortage of serious reflection on how the major academic disciplines have changed over the decades since World War II, and much of this work has been done ably by intellectual historians. But strikingly few of us have been interested in explaining how and why college and university campuses have become important sites of literary and artistic activity in their own right. What McGurl has done in showing the causes and consequences of making fiction a subject of modern academic study needs to be done for virtually all the other literary and creative arts (many of which—beginning with poetry—are even more dependent on the university for their

continuing existence). Work also needs to be done in tracing roles that particular programs in writing and the arts have played in the history of local and regional cultures. There are dozens of interesting and untold stories of how programs in writing and the arts have thrived in such unlikely settings such as West Lafayette, Indiana; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Lincoln, Nebraska; Houston, Texas; and Irvine, California.

Second, exercise caution in generalizing about “American higher education.” *The Marketplace of Ideas* does not give us, as its publisher claims, an answer to the question “has American higher education become a dinosaur?” As it stands, the question is unanswerable since we deceive ourselves if we choose to generalize about higher education as if it were a single set of institutions with a common purpose. Menand’s book is mostly about problems that confront elite institutions and certain disciplines (almost all in the humanities) within those institutions. Serious understanding of American higher education begins with the recognition that it is not just a huge and highly stratified landscape, but one peopled by what Burton Clark has called “a multitude of academic tribes.” Highly specialized research scholars in liberal-arts disciplines form one of the nation’s academic tribes, but they are less numerous (and increasingly less powerful) than Menand lets on.

Finally, whatever intellectual historians may develop in the way of new interpretations of the dominant role universities play in the nation’s intellectual and cultural affairs, they should recognize that American universities have never been, and surely will never become, places devoted primarily to nurturing the life of the mind, let alone safeguarding the prerogatives of the imagination. What follows from this recognition—apart from a call to abandon the lament about “academicization” once and for all—is hard to say. Should we be surprised to discover that there is so much serious literary and artistic work being done in universities across the country? Should we be concerned there is not more of it, and if so, on what grounds? Such questions invite a variety of responses. An answer made in good faith, however, depends on one’s ability to accept the fact that throughout its history the American university has been something of a makeshift institution, pursuing several ideas of what a university is for and as a result always ready to adapt to different social and economic needs. Seen from this vantage point, the dominant role universities play in our intellectual and cultural life certainly looks less formidable, perhaps even contingent. It is by no means the most important of the many roles universities play in our national affairs. It also is not unthinkable that developments which combined to assign them this role could give way to others which will diminish or even reverse it. In some moods, idealistic champions of the university like to proclaim it has a true inner core that consists of a commitment to reason and its rigorous application. But anyone who has spent time at a typical American university knows that it is a sprawling,

multitasking institution that struggles to meet seemingly irreconcilable demands. Or, as Harvard's president Drew Gilpin Faust put it recently, the American university tries "to be practical as well as transcendent; to assist immediate national needs and to pursue knowledge for its own sake; to both add value and question values."¹⁰ And the list of course could go on.

¹⁰ Drew Gilpin, in *New York Times Book Review*, 6 Sept. 2009.