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“Cash Is Better than Tenure”: (De)Constructing the
“Posthistorical University” in James Hynes’s
Gothic Academic Satire *The Lecturer’s Tale*

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Abstract

This article analyzes the manner in which James Hynes’s novel *The Lecturer’s Tale* (2001) can be read as a satire of what Bill Readings identified in his influential *The University in Ruins* (1996) as the “posthistorical university.” I argue that, in the contemporary context in which higher education establishments are becoming more like corporations and the idea of culture is replaced by the “discourse of excellence,” Hynes’s novel offers an insightful discussion of universities’ negotiation of the Scylla of the pursuit of profit and the Charybdis of self-absorbed literary theorizing and its association with political correctness, the exploitation of junior and non-tenured faculty, and the quest for academic stardom. At the same time, I discuss the way in which the Gothic elements that permeate the novel fittingly double and deepen the critique of contemporary educational establishments and professors.

Keywords: academic satire, the Gothic, university of excellence, literary trends, academic superstars, privatization of universities

“People who come downstairs from Ivory Towers
splash straight into the gutter.”
(Smith 156)

Whether it brings to light the vibrant life of the academic community with a certain degree of veracity or, on the contrary, it distorts the image of the scholastic environment to the point of grotesque, the contemporary academic novel can be read as “a fun-house mirror held up to the nature of our colleges and universities, one that, for all its grotesquerie, packs a

good deal of truth within its pages” (Pinsker 183). Recent criticism about the academic novel tends to concur that the great majority of the latest works provide a more scathing critique than their precursors and expose a world rife with trifles and perversion, dominated by vanity and gratuitousness, tainted by plagiarism and the mindless pursuit of personal advantage rather than of learning (Bailey and Slay 26). Along the same lines, Dalton-Brown observes that *Homo Academicus* has rarely been illustrated as a leader or an inspirational professor, but has mostly been depicted as a fraud or a fool, definitely as sexually promiscuous, trapped within such a politically claustrophobic environment that it almost appears to encourage fakery, foolishness, and philandering (591). Similarly, for Adam Begley the pulsating campus life makes room for “the pretentious, the dangerously dull and self-absorbed, the militantly complacent, and the resolutely hypocritical” (qtd. in Moseley 8).

Merritt Moseley writes that, as the “key determinant of the academic novel,” satire vents the academic novelist’s “urge to reveal, and perhaps punish, the follies and shortcomings of the academic institution in which he or she has been a dweller and participant” (7). Similarly, Bruce Robbins argues that starting with Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954), there has been no doubt that satire would be the chosen mode, and that “[t]he only relevant questions have been how satiric the collective portrait would be and what institutions, schools of thought, or character types would be singled out for ridicule” (249). In academic fiction, satire is mainly used with the intent and purpose of undercutting the academy by exposing its underlying contradictions and by “illuminating the ways in which it subverts goodness and the search for self-knowledge,” which it achieves through the creation of a “miniature society that functions upon existential threats and dubious rites of competition” (Womack 29-30). Consequently, as Womack observes, the favored targets of satirical attacks tend to be “those privileged individuals who endeavor to maintain the academic status quo in their favor through the exploitation of junior colleagues, and, ultimately, through the threat of expulsion from the seemingly sacred groves of campus life” (27).

James Hynes’s novel *The Lecturer’s Tale* (2001) includes nearly all the features of the contemporary academic novel presented above. It

builds on the threat of expulsion from the academic community and its repercussions on one's career and family life, on the exploitation of junior faculty and of non-tenured members of the community, on scathing portraits of professors and of the so-called 'academic superstars', to achieve a poignant critique of literary trends, political correctness and affirmative action, as well as to offer insights into the transformation of a higher education establishment into a profit-driven corporation. More originally, to such staples of the academic novel as political infighting and sexual intrigue, Hynes's work fittingly adds Gothic mystery and "the funky, unruly energy of modern horror fiction" (Bailey and Slay 27). Originally born as a discourse against the rationality of the Enlightenment and keen on undermining authority (Truffin 3), the Gothic felicitously doubles and deepens the critique of contemporary educational establishments and professors, themselves self-described keepers of enlightenment and figures of authority.

The Lecturer's Tale does not mark Hynes's first attempt at combining academic satire and the Gothic. His previous *Publish and Perish: Three Tales of Tenure and Terror* (1997) similarly provides a biting analysis of scholarly practices (plagiarism, for instance), while at the same time exploring tropes and motifs frequently met in tales of the supernatural. The first novella, "Queen of the Jungle," looks at the relationship between an uncanny, enigmatic cat and its academic master. Fundamental fears reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's lore, such as that of being buried alive, are explored in the second novella, "99," while classic horror tales are rewritten in the third piece of the collection, "Casting the Runes," an adaptation of M.R. James's story of the same name originally published in 1911.

James Hynes claims that his interest in authoring academic novels stems from his passion for literature and the manner in which it is taught in American universities, but also from what he sees as the discrepancy between "what academia claims to be – which is a disinterested realm where people can have this life of the mind – and what it really is, which is kind of scorpions in a bottle fighting over diminishing resources" (Schaub). Ironically, if this is the case, the novel itself can be read as a form of hardly 'disinterested' retribution from a former academic. As

Sanford Pinsker notes, “if a university sacks a creative writer, as was the case with Hynes at the University of Michigan, it can count on seeing lots of dirty linen hung out to dry” (185).

It is my contention that James Hynes’s academic-cum-horror narrative puts forth in a comical, satirical and, at times, chilling manner a critique of the American educational establishment at the turn of the twenty-first century which illustrates what Bill Readings identifies in his influential *The University in Ruins* (1997) as the “posthistorical university.”

The multiversity in ruins

According to Readings, the (American) university is an institution which “has outlived itself” and its purpose, being a “survivor of the era in which it defined itself in terms of the project of the *historical* development, affirmation and inculcation of national culture” (Readings 6, emphasis in the original). Besides its role as guardian of national culture, David Harvey believes that, especially in the United States, the main function of the academic establishment was that of delivering a promise “to create tradition, found mythologies, form a ‘republican’ subject who could combine rationality and sentiment and exercise judgment within a system of democratic governance,” as the university was “where elite citizens went to be socialized and educated” (3).

Given the contemporary fluid borders and the massification of higher education, in the United States and elsewhere, Readings is of the opinion that the former “ideological arm of the state” seems busy transforming itself into a “bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer-orientated corporation” (11) whose “discourse of excellence” is “replacing the appeal to culture in the North American University” (Readings 36). The buzzword “excellence” was at the core of the emerging “multiversity” of the 1960s-1970s, the term by which Clark Kerr, perhaps the greatest postwar reformer of the American university, sought to describe the products of the modernization process he spearheaded at the University of California state system and which then spread elsewhere (Levine 44-47). But “excellence” is, according to

Readings, "a non-referential principle that allows the maximum of uninterrupted internal administration" (120), which by the same token means that "the University of Excellence is one in which a general principle of administration replaces the dialectic of teaching and research, so that teaching and research, as aspects of professional life, are subsumed under administration" (Readings 125).

Along the same lines, Derek Bok, himself an academic and former president of Harvard, maintains that in the absence of "any clear mission beyond a vague commitment to 'excellence,' our sprawling multiversities are charged with creating a vacuum into which material pursuits have rushed in unimpeded" (5). As this "University of Excellence" tends to serve none other than itself as just "another corporation in a world of transnationally exchanged capital" (Readings 43), it goes to show that "[t]he University of Excellence is the simulacrum of the idea of a University" (Readings 54). This, in turn, is reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard's observation in his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) that "[t]he university is in ruins" as it appears "nonfunctional in the social arenas of the market and employment, lacking cultural substance or an end purpose of knowledge" (Baudrillard 98).

James Hynes's "posthistorical university" is the fictional University of the Midwest in Hamilton Groves, Minnesota, which is also featured in his previous *Publish and Perish*. His main focus is the faculty and academic practices within the English Department, which appears dominated by internal strife illustrating the divergent directions within the discipline and the field of literary theory. Appropriately for a Gothic-tinged narrative, the novel starts on a Halloween day when the freshly fired adjunct professor Nelson Humboldt is involved in an accident in the university quad and his finger is severed by a passing bicycle. His misfortune makes room for the first manifestations of the uncanny in the novel, as prior to losing his balance "Nelson glimpsed a red, grinning mask with horns, and he was reminded of the undergraduate tradition that the old library was haunted – by the ghost of a suicide, if memory served" (Hynes 245-246¹). Then, just before passing out as a result of his finger being brutally cut off, in another scene echoing the Gothic tradition, "Nelson thought he saw, framed by the white clock face of the tower

looming against the churning clouds, the figure in the black cape bending over him. The mask was gone, and Nelson saw, or thought he saw, within the hood of the cape, a faceless face, a silvery oblong with no eyes, nose, or mouth” (Hynes 260-262). This faceless apparition which haunts the old library in the university quarters is actually a recurring presence throughout the novel and arguably the protagonist of a grotesque series of events towards the end of the novel. Thus the Gothic frame of the novel is primarily established by this eerie incident in the opening, which sets the tone, and by the image of the hovering specter haunting the old library and the clock tower, which is used to build suspense throughout the narrative and to prefigure the later, full-throttle eruption of the supernatural in the finale.

Once reattached, using a gimmick evocative of W.W. Jacobs’s classic supernatural tale “The Monkey’s Paw” (1902), the finger allows Nelson to coerce anyone touched by it to grant him his wishes. This turns out to come in quite handy considering that he had just been fired as he was expecting tenure, which meant that he and his family (wife and two daughters) would not only lose their sole source of income, but also their accommodation (university married housing) and the health insurance for all the family members. Consequently, Nelson manages to keep a position within the department and also to maintain the family lodgings, resorting to his newly acquired supernatural powers of persuasion. But then Nelson becomes aware of all the good he could do and of the many things he could improve within the academic community, such as helping his only friend in the department get tenure. As if trying to prove Bill Readings, who stated that “the University no longer has a hero for its grand narrative” (Readings 126), wrong, Nelson Humboldt embarks upon what Allan Bloom identified as “the adventure of a liberal education” (336), but soon becomes the anti-hero of a picaresque academic story which ends up in flames.

After eight years spent at the University of the Midwest, Nelson had fallen from a “prestigious postdoctoral fellowship, at the rank of assistant professor” to teaching composition and study skills based on a semester-to-semester contract. He is portrayed as an “Everyman – an everystraightmidwesternwhiteman” (Reiter), “pale of skin and round of

face, his thinning hair so fair as to be almost white," limbs "as round as bowling pins, his muscles without definition," powerful yet lacking grace, "never good at competitive sports, though he exerted himself mightily" (Hynes 330-333). Prior to his being able to turn people's minds with a single touch, Humboldt's gift (a potential reference to Saul Bellow, on which more in the "Conclusions") and "chief attribute as a teacher and scholar" was "an unusually thorough memory of the canon" (Hynes 186-187). His father's dream had been to transform young Nelson into a "prodigy of literary scholarship" and for this the latter had been brought up into an entire regimen of canonical authors, "*Beowulf* in the bassinet, *Piers Plowman* in the crib, and Chaucer in Middle English just about the time Nelson was learning to walk, . . . , Shakespeare all the way through kindergarten and first grade" (Hynes 356-357). His chronological literary adventure continued well into his high school years and then in graduate school, where he surprisingly discovered that "no one was doing close reading anymore" (Hynes 452) and that the word "literature" used during the English class could bring one a failing grade and make the professor "reach for [his] revolver" (Hynes 479).

Consequently, it may not be farfetched to state that Nelson's dwelling in the literary world of what the novel identifies as "DWEMs" (dead white European males) represents one of the major shortcomings of his academic career. In this, the novel's anti-hero enacts the predicament of the postwar humanities professor of classical taste and humanistic ethos, whose academic marginalization by the "tenured radicals" represented the chief lament of the conservative camp of the culture wars. Made to doubt his patrimony, Nelson is facing the dilemma of killing his cultural forefathers lest he abuse the youngsters entrusted into his care. He is almost persuaded that "his encyclopedic knowledge of English literature was a sort of child abuse, his father's phallogocentric attempt to colonize Nelson's consciousness with the hegemonic discourse" (Hynes 496-497). As a result, he becomes "one of the shell-shocked and self-effacing white males" who had "entered the academy because they loved books and the idea of a comfortable, contemplative life," but who were now living under the impact of "very large volumes of cultural studies, queer theory, and postcolonial interventions thudding into the prairie all

around them like artillery,” where “[e]ach concussion was an announcement that their race and gender were the root of all evil” (Hynes 557-565). Trapped between the literary world of his upbringing and the new demands of the discipline, and because “he needed to publish and he didn’t have any better ideas,”

Nelson ground out [James] Hogg article after Hogg article, ending up with a book-length manuscript of unpublished and mutually exclusive chapters, each of which proved with equal conviction that James Hogg was a virgin and a libertine; a misogynist and an early feminist; hegemonic and transgressive; imperialist and postcolonial; patriarchal and matriarchal; straight, bisexual, and queer. Hogg’s text was scorched earth by now, a plain trampled by the passage of one army after another. (Hynes 709-712)

The passage above is revelatory of one of the main conflicts at the core of James Hynes’s novel, as it clearly mocks the quicksands of literary theory which allow for “one army after another” of fashionable literary trends to approach the same text in a multitude of ways and give it myriad interpretations best suited to each literary faction within the discipline, until the fecund ground which generates reading after reading becomes nothing more than “scorched earth.” The narrative becomes even more acidly critical when it posits that (over)writing about other people’s writing represents “the only distinguishing characteristic of a literature professor at the millennium” and that “the writing he wrote about didn’t even need to be literature, or writing about literature, or even writing about writing about literature. He needed theory” (Hynes 5314-5317).

Living between the two worlds, that of traditional scholarship on the one hand and that of “cutting-edge theory” on the other, Nelson ambitiously harbors the “Kiplingesque idea” that “he could be the bridge between the two worlds, the New Order and the Old, that he could walk comfortably among both princes and postmodernists, bringing them together with statesmanlike compassion: Nelson the Peacemaker” (Hynes 604-606). Moreover, he realizes that his newly gained preternatural influence can be put in the service of “bringing balm and sweet reason to the culture wars, of black, lesbian, queer theorists laughing uproariously at Alexander Pope, of sixty-year-old white men identifying with the heroine

of *Beloved*." In other words, in Nelson's dream world, "there was no rancor on the one hand, and no guilt on the other" (Hynes 2171-2173).

A quarrel of the ancients and the postmoderns

In order to achieve his dream, on the one hand, Nelson has to bring down the unjust structure of the department, in which the powerful (read: tenured professors, especially the star academics) had offices in the tower, together with their assistants and their secretaries, while the hard-working women in the composition program had to inhabit "the Underworld." According to Susan Miller, composition has always been tied to pedagogy rather than to theory and consequently believed to be more suited to be taught by women (Truffin 18). Most of the composition teachers in Hynes's novel were single moms or divorced women clinging to semester-to-semester contracts "with the desperate devotion of anchoresses" (Hynes 1334). Combining "the bitter esprit de corps of assembly-line workers with the literate wit of the overeducated," these unacknowledged faculty members were "the Morlocks to the Eloi of the eighth floor." Led by the "queen of the Underworld," Linda Proserpina, a "petite, wide-eyed woman with prematurely gray hair and skin as pale as moonlight" (Hynes 1345-1346), they made up

the colonial periphery, harvesting for pennies a day the department's raw material – undergraduates – and shipping these processed students farther up the hierarchy, thus creating the leisure for the professors at the imperial center to pursue their interests in feminist theory and postcolonial literature. (Hynes 1333-1339)

On the other hand, Nelson Humboldt has to reconcile the different factions within the theory-driven English department, whose infightings are illustrative of the intellectual tensions and divergent directions within the discipline. Theorist Michael Bérubé observes that because English is "a field whose center is nowhere and whose circumference is everywhere," the crisis in the discipline represents an embodiment and a dramatization of the postmodern crisis in higher education in general (qtd. in Sarbu 255). Critics Nelson and Watt note that "the operative definition

of academic departments might be something like ‘fratricidal congeries of learned persons’” (18-19) and further maintain that for many years “English was split between those who identified with the theory revolution and those traditionalists who rejected it; the theory folks have mostly won and the traditionalists are thoroughly embittered” (Nelson and Watt 18). On a similar, but more emphatically conservative note, Harold Bloom laments the irreversible “Balkanization of literary studies” in which “professors of hip-hop” stand side by side with “clones of Gallic-Germanic theory,” “ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions,” as well as with “multiculturalists unlimited” (517).

In James Hynes’s academic satire, the members of Midwest’s English Department are all stereotypical images of fashionable contemporary theorists, what Harold Bloom calls the “School of Resentment” (527), and staple faculty types in contemporary academic novels. Victoria Victorinix, the English Department’s undergraduate chair, is in good old Gothic tradition the vampire-like character in the novel and also the lesbian Feminist theorist in the English Department. Despite decades of ostracism because of her sexual preference, she managed to “outlast the genteel bigotry of deans, chairmen, and senior colleagues to end up as a tenured full professor at a prestigious research university” (Hynes 129). The other prominent members include the star performer Miranda DeLa Tour, rumored to be the lover of the department chair, “the flamboyant and forceful Anthony Pescecane,” but then again “rumors of that sort trailed every attractive woman in the academy” (Hynes 176); the only senior African American in the department, Stephen Michael Stephens, who is expected to deal with all “black folk” matters without “being threatening or inducing guilt” (Hynes 799) to his white colleagues; a Canadian Lady novelist who is believed to be the sole likely candidate in the department for a major literary prize; an Irish-poet-type American professor known as “the Coogan” and notorious for multiple sexual harassment charges; and Marko Kraljević, the department’s “premier theorist,” author of “Fenomenology [sic] of Spirit I and II. Modern Weapons Systems” (Hynes 5571-5572), and wanted for war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia. Kraljević is a very likely parodical embodiment of what David H. Hirsch identified as the European barbarian

and anti-humanist "ideational context that led to Auschwitz" (19) in the tradition of Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man.

The department roster further includes a sex theorist endowed with the "Hugh M. Hefner Chair in Sexuality Studies" and the English Department's senior full professor, Morton Weissman, whose name points to the 'dead white men' of the canon under attack in contemporary literary theory. Strong in his conviction that "postmodern scholarship and celebrity murder trials are signs of the Apocalypse" (Hynes 2439), Weissman represents, as it has been argued, the "traditional Cleanth-Brooks-clone" (Showalter 135). He had turned into the very champion of literature, mounting "an aggressive counterattack on behalf of the canon" (Hynes 2150-2152), constantly undermined in the new day and age.

Weissman's marginal status in the department aptly illustrates the position of culture in the 'posthistorical' university. According to critics such as Harvey and Readings, the attack on the canon of "dead white men" signals the "end of the university as guardian of universal truths and values" (Harvey 3). Emphasizing the mutability of the literary canon in American higher education, Bill Readings observed that in the United States "[t]he content of the canon is grounded upon the moment of a social contract rather than the continuity of a historical tradition, and therefore is always open to revision" (35). A more radical conservative observer of the state of the canon at the turn of the twenty-first century, Roger Kimball writes in his famous tract *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (originally published in 1990) that

No one familiar with the kind of thing that passes for scholarship today will be surprised to discover . . . that the presentation of a paper called 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl' at the 1989 annual meeting of the Modern Language Association was matched by a paper at the 1990 meeting on 'The Lesbian Phallus: Or, Does Heterosexuality Exist?' and, in 1994, 'The Epistemology of the Queer Classroom'. (270)

Besides the fact that a paper on "the lesbian phallus" (of Dorian Gray) is intensely debated at one point in Hynes's novel in an obvious tongue-in-cheek reference, similar topics (and titles) are dispersed throughout the novel alongside reference to such classics as *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Tempest*, *Paradise Lost* and numerous allusions to other literary

masterworks in the Anglo-Saxon world of letters, not to mention the Gothic building blocks of the novel. In this respect, James Hynes's novel manages to ironically show how contemporary literary trends undermine the established canon while at the same time providing a rollercoaster ride through it, beginning to end. As Elaine Showalter observes, Hynes's narrative reads like "a Norton Anthology of a novel, a course in a book that covers all the literary material of an introductory survey in English literature" (136).

The chair of the English Department is the Italian-American Anthony Pescecane, who, despite his mob boss figure and power-mad statement of belief that "the finest thing in life is to take an academic department and bend it to one's will" (Hynes 1969-1971), was a "star of the profession and an influential public intellectual" (Hynes 1679). His surname, as well as his scholarly highlights ("*To Reign in Hell: The Will to Power in Paradise Lost*" and "*Screw Free Speech*") are evocative of Stanley Fish's renowned reader-response works on Milton and his pragmatist approach to free speech.² Fish also gained acclaim as chair of Duke's English Department in the eighties, where he assembled a major and very diverse cast of famed literary theorists.

In his rather controversial "The Star System in Literary Studies," David Shumway seeks to explain why some scholars become "stars" of the discipline. He identifies part of the cause in "the development of academic practices such as the growth of the conference circuit and the rise of literary theory" (86). With respect to the former, Shumway believes that the conference and lecture circuit "has changed the structure of the way in which we do business" (91) by encouraging an intensely competitive environment which turns the authors of the most or the best publications into stars (94). He further explains that institutions not ranked among the most prestigious tried to lure academic stars with light teaching loads and disproportionately high salaries, which further contributed to "star wars" between universities and frequent job changes for many of these "token professionals," to use James Sosnoski's phrase (qtd. in Shumway 94). Shumway also believes that the emergence of various directions within literary theory contributed, to a large extent, to the rise and proliferation of such academic figures, given that "the field of literary

studies is made up of conflicting discursive practices, each of which depends on at least a theory star of greater or lesser magnitude." This is so especially since "knowledge in literary studies is defined not by virtuosity of critical performance or by the accumulation of facts but by the enlisted names of the fathers (and, increasingly, the mothers, though the stars remain predominantly male)" (Shumway 95). The critic even goes on to claim that among American stars, Fish doubtlessly appears as "the most adept at exploiting the star system" (96).

Like Fish, Anthony Pesceane is set to reap the benefits of the "star system." When "the Coogan" is forced to leave the department at Nelson's intervention, instead of granting tenure to one of their highly deserving female colleagues, Vita Deonne, chair Pesceane starts "Fishing" for an academic superstar to come join their ranks, aware that "[i]n cutting-edge scholarship, as in trendy cuisine, presentation was everything" (Hynes 3986). For this, he manages to shortlist the candidates to those who "had branded him or herself, constructing a clearly defined, entertaining, and easily recognizable persona" (Hynes 3985-3987). One of these candidates is Jennifer manly (the original spelling in the novel), the queer theorist of the moment who had "broadened the mandate of queer theory to subjects outside of gay and lesbian studies" (Hynes 3977). Another one is David Branwell, "a Yorkshireman of cruelly good looks" and a leading theorist of a self-referentially titled subfield, *Celebrity Studies*. Branwell had built his way up to academic stardom "through indispensable works on Wayne Newton, Englebert Humperdinck, and Siegfried and Roy" (Hynes 4365-4367). The third academic star that Pesceane considers a worthy addition to the theory-based department is the postcolonialist Lester Antilles,³ who looks like a "globe-trotting, guerilla intellectual" meet "Columbian drug lord" and who harbors an ideology of "engaged nonparticipation" in order to avoid complicity with "the hegemonic discourse of Western postcolonial cultural imperialism" (Hynes 4237). In practice, this meant that he refused to "teach any classes, hold any office hours, publish any books, serve on any committees, or supervise any dissertations" (Hynes 4241). However, the narrative scathingly points out that for "this demanding and theoretically sophisticated subaltern intervention in the dominant discourse, Antilles

made well into the six figures, more money than the president of the United States” (Hynes 4236-4243). Eventually, Nelson Humboldt manages to sabotage all three candidates resorting to his newly acquired supernatural powers, hoping in vain that the tenured position would go to Vita.

Vita Deonne is the gender theorist of the department and the only one whom Nelson could call a friend. She is the very embodiment of her research interests, as her figure, attire and behavior deliberately render her gender-ambiguous. Besides the obvious tongue-in-cheek reference to and deconstruction of (Judith Butler’s) gender performativity theory, of which Vita is clearly a parody, her presence in the novel also reinforces the work’s Gothic frame: Vita’s status in the department, and in the economy of the novel more broadly, serves as an illustration of Julia Kristeva’s concept of ‘abjection’, which is one of the building blocks of horror fiction. Judith Butler believes gender to be an “act” which is “open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (200). Along the same lines, Kristeva’s theory of abjection is concerned with figures that are in a state of transition or transformation, with unstable, borderline and thus dreadful subjects. Crucial in the formation of identity, the phenomenon of abjection is a violent process which pulverizes the subject and destabilizes it by exposing the fragility underlining any creation of subjectivity. Its perverseness undermines the security of ownership of one’s own body and one’s own self. The abject lies in “[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4).

The ivory tower that fell to earth

The ultimate undermining of gender stability occurs toward the end of the novel, when the supernatural bursts in full throttle and the ambiguous takes over, as a magical being is apparently born out of the clockworks which unexplainably “shrieked as if in pain, a high, grinding whine,” thrusting out “a shining figure that fell straight toward the floor” (Hynes

7336). The creature is a composite of Vita, her brother/ double Robin, and a mysterious sprite, all at once. As the novel explains, quoting Milton,

spirits, when they please . . . can either sex assume, or both, so oft and uncompounded is their essence pure. Not tied or manacled with joint or limb, . . . nor founded on the brittle strength of bones, like cumbrous flesh. . . . But in what shape they choose, . . . dilated or condensed, bright or obscure, can execute their airy purposes! (Hynes 7346-7350)

The end of the novel brings about the long-awaited change in the University of the Midwest, after the university quarters, including the emblematic Thornfield library, are destroyed in a major fire, in pure Gothic fashion no doubt reminiscent of the fall of Thornfield Hall in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. With its crooked construction, its "narrow, redbrick clock tower . . . , erected not very symmetrically at one corner of the square old building" (Hynes 211-213), its "nooks and grottoes, its levels and half-levels, its vibrating iron staircases, and its ringing metal floors, its low ceilings and hissing pipes wrapped in asbestos" (Hynes 5303), the old library is representative of Gothic edifices and suggestive of H.P. Lovecraft's haywire structures or Shirley Jackson's off-centered, architecturally confusing buildings. The downfall of this structure at the end of the novel serves Hynes to parody the Gothic trope of purification by fire or rebirth after annihilation so familiar in such classic American Gothic writers as Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson, or Joyce Carol Oates.

The keeper of old tomes, encyclopedias and long-extinct journals, and allegedly haunted by the "figure behind the mock battlements above the clock face, silhouetted against the sky at dusk" (Hynes 759), the old library becomes the ultimate site of mysterious manifestations triggered by Nelson Humboldt's strategy of revenge. Trapped in the library tower together with the vampirical Victoria Victorinix, Nelson is attacked by a pale figure rushing at him in the dark and eventually wakes up to an apocalyptic scenario, in a "windowless room with walls of smoking brick and a floor of heaving, buckling wooden planks," where a "furious red glare stabbed through the cracks in the floorboard," while a "stinging smoke poured through . . . , tightening Nelson's windpipe and searing his

eyes” (Hynes 7139). As if inside a vast collapsing machine, the two academics are suddenly surrounded by cascading sparks and shrieks of grinding metal, until it becomes obvious that the entire edifice is going to collapse. Ironically, they manage to escape the library in flames by building a pile of old books thrown out the window in order to ease their landing from the third floor. And as books “flew out into midnight darkness – names that had tumbled from the canon or had never quite made it in – Sir Walter Scott and Edmund Spenser and Rumer Godden and Thornton Wilder and Edna Ferber and John Galsworthy” (Hynes 7566-7568), Nelson realizes that “at the very least, the books they were flinging out the window might survive the fire” (Hynes 7574).

The collapse of the university can be read both as a general statement on the predicament of the contemporary university and as a more specific illustration parodying the decline of the English Department at Duke. In the first construal, it could be argued that the collapsing institution is not just the fictional Midwest, but the Humboldtian model of university itself, defined by its unity of teaching and research, which involves the creation and communication of knowledge within a democratic community based on the concord of teachers and learners. The set of values that was suitable “for an elite [university system] is felt to be no longer suitable for a mass system” (Pritchard 511). On the more particular level suggested above, the destruction of the higher education establishment in Hynes’s novel may also point to the notorious implosion of the formerly Stanley Fish-headed English Department at Duke in the nineties, or what David Yaffe called “the department that fell to earth.” After Fish departed as head of a department where he assembled the who’s who of cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s, the members of the “Old Guard” were pitted against the “Young Turks,” left against right, cultural studies advocates against literary critics and “globe-trotting celebrities” against “classroom-loving teachers” (Yaffe 25). Thus, the novel’s finale brings together both the general critique of the erosion of the contemporary university and the parody of the much hyped ‘model of excellence’ in the humanities represented by Duke under Stanley Fish.

Subsequent to its destruction, Midwest is sold to the Harbridge Corporation, “an international publishing conglomerate that was in the

process of branding itself as ‘America’s One-Stop Education Resource!,’” and turned into *Midwestern™ A Harbridge Company*. The motto also changes from *Sapientia prima stultitia caruisse*⁴ to “We’re *Midwestern™* – If We Don’t Teach It, You Don’t Need to Know It” (Hynes 7832). As tenure is abolished and replaced with year-to-year contracts, with staff to be assessed biannually based entirely on student evaluations, the members of the faculty flee to secure positions elsewhere, while the unacknowledged lecturers in “the Underworld” take over the English department whose new chair is now, again ironically, none other than Nelson Humboldt. Moreover, in a move evocative of the former champion of literary theory, Frank Lentricchia’s denunciation of theory and political criticism in favor of teaching literature, ex-chair Anthony Pescecanne renounces literary theory in order to commit himself “for the rest of his life to teaching undergraduates, and only undergraduates, to love the same great, canonical works of literature that had rescued him from the docklands of New Jersey.” As it turns out, after giving up his role as “the Michael Corleone of theory,” Pescecanne aims to become “the Tony Soprano of pedagogy” (Hynes 7909-7913). In the newly privatized *Midwestern*, all members of the staff are required to wear the company blazer and recommend solely books published by the Harbridge company, while *Pandemonium*, the scholarly bookstore, becomes the generically-named *U Shop*, which brings financial gain to the university by dealing in such commodities as shirts, caps, and mugs bearing the university logo. This illustrates Edgerton and Farber’s point that the universities’ pursuit of “excellence” often becomes conflated with profitability which, in turn, makes them abandon their intellectual mission in order to access the corporate profit pipeline (9).

Conclusions

The acerbic and occasionally transparent satire of *The Lecturer’s Tale* may suggest that the book is to be read as a rather unambiguous “morality tale,” whose everyman protagonist meets various incarnations of the virtues and – especially – vices of academia and must choose between good and evil. Indeed, anti-hero Humboldt’s supernatural *gift* of

persuasion is, besides the obvious reference to the founding-father of the modern university model, an evocation of Saul Bellow's tale of urban picaresque. Bellow himself was, of course, an embattled participant in the academic culture wars, a friend of Allan Bloom and the author of the preface to the latter's iconic *The Closing of the American Mind*.

But the deceptive purification by fire of the novel's finale points to a more equivocal reading. Thus, just like Nelson's ambiguous and ambitious pursuit throughout the novel, which eventually leads to the destruction of the institution (his actions might be triggered by his rejection, or may have the more altruistic aim of securing Vita a tenured position and overturning the structure of power within the department), the narrative's ending remains open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, the ending may temper the book's sardonic, caricaturing criticisms of the practice of theory in academia and suggest that, in the end, "[i]t is not women and postmodernists who threaten the Ivory Tower" but "America's corporate mentality" (Nichols). The newly created 'corporate McUniversity' (Bailey and Slay 26) turns the Ivy-aspiring University of the Midwest into (one possible version of) Readings's university in ruins. The Japanese-American scholar Masao Miyoshi points out that the fragmentation and demoralization in contemporary academia, as well as its apparent loss of direction and purpose are both the cause and the effect of "the stunning silence [and] the fearful disengagement" in the face of the radical process of corporatization that higher education establishments are undergoing (48).

Alternatively, some critics have claimed that the finale appears "surprisingly positive and even utopian" (Showalter 136), as Nelson's revenge is complete, his victory assured and his position within the new university secured. While maintaining that the novel can indeed be read as a "revenge of the lecturers" tale in which the underappreciated members of the staff take over the English Department, other critics have noted that the newly established university has lost its scholarly agenda. It now teaches cohorts of students who couldn't have otherwise met the admission requirements of the former University of the Midwest (Feldman 78), such as "inner-city black kids, Latino kids from farmworker families, poor white kids from dying industrial towns,

divorced moms, downsized middle-managers, laid-off factory workers” (Hynes 8006-8010).

Such divergent readings of Midwest’s predicament highlight the novel’s refusal to provide analytical closure, even though, superficially, one camp does emerge victorious. The university obviously trades one problem – the theoretical overindulgence in literary studies – for another when the higher education establishment becomes a locus of corporate greed. But Hynes’s intentions with this reversal are less than transparent. For his part, despite the occasionally somber tone of his tract, Bill Readings does not believe the posthistorical university to be necessarily beyond redemption. He finds some hope in eschewing radical choices, noting that one should not try to bring about the rebirth or renaissance of the University, but instead learn to dwell in its ruins, “without recourse to romantic nostalgia” (171). He thus sketches a project for the posthistorical university, arguing that the market structure of this model makes the student as consumer an inescapable reality, the restructuring of disciplines a necessary condition, and advocates adaptability, not “denunciation or mourning” (179). After all, he posits, “[t]he University is not going to save the world by making the world more true, nor is the world going to save the University by making the University more real” (171). Hynes, on the other hand, provides no hint of a project for the future of the university. Midwest undergoes no evolutionary process of change, but simply switches unpredictably from one end of the ideological spectrum to the other, from thesis to antithesis, literally overnight. Unlike with Readings, there seems to be no hope of synthesis.

Notes:

¹ As James Hynes’s novel is in Kindle format, the numbers represent location and not page numbers.

² *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in “Paradise Lost”* (1967) and *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It’s a Good Thing, Too* (1994), respectively.

³ The Lesser Antilles are a group of volcanic islands, the smallest and arguably the most peripheral, in the Caribbean Sea.

⁴ “The beginning of wisdom is to have gotten rid of folly.”

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