
Modern
Language
Association
MLA
Academe's Extinction Event
Failure, Whiskey, and Professional Collapse at the MLA
JAN FEINDT FOR THE CHRONICLE

THE REVIEW

By Andrew Kay May 10, 2019

Chicago

All at once it hit me: a shudder. I'd been doing fine all day — merrily, even. Fresh off the bus to downtown Chicago, eased by a steady titration since breakfast of Maker's Mark, I'd fairly danced down Wacker Drive, rolling suitcase in tow. I had this. It was brazen and ballsy, what I was doing, and I was to be commended for it. But then I got to the Hyatt Regency, and the automatic doors at front opened before me like a sort of maw, and I ventured in. In an instant it failed me — my Stuart Smalley self-talk, my diligent pregaming on bourbon — and I stood there in the lobby effectively naked, a gibbering infant exposed to the light.

I was back: I was at MLA (short for "Modern Language Association"), the annual pageant for literary studies, my old vocation. Here scholars gather every January, performing the time-honored rite of solemnly chanting 20-minute papers before one another in hotel conference rooms. And here, until recently, the field held interviews for its ever-dwindling pool of tenure-track professorships. They've largely switched to Skype now.

I went to four of these conferences on my own dime from 2013 to 2016, interviewing fruitlessly. Along the way I developed an anxiety problem and several exotic tics — my blinking got sort of messed up; I started baking compulsively. At last I left, publishing an essay that likened the academic job market to Tinder, but somehow more depraved. It felt like walking out of a place and tossing a Molotov cocktail over my shoulder.

Academe, as anyone knows who's tried to leave it, is like a partner who is wrenchingly hard to quit. When it was good, it was amazing. God, the highs! The horizon of your happiness seemed unbounded. But the partner turned out to be a nut job who demanded nothing less than all of you. Move to a different city every year, they stipulated. Subsist on bread crumbs. Completely debase yourself. They constantly evaluated your "performance." On a whim, they dressed you up in a sailor suit and beat you.

It was finally too much to bear. I got out to save myself, starting life anew as an essayist and journalist. And I landed a part-time job at a private company, teaching writing to students with disabilities. I could hardly believe my good fortune in escaping.

Academe, as anyone knows who's tried to leave it, is like a partner who is wrenchingly hard to quit.

The touch of an ex-lover, though, is not so easily forgotten. Swimming happily along in your new life, you are swept back by an undertow of remembered joy that draws you to its source. At work in the evenings, standing at a whiteboard desk and helping a student with a paper, I found myself scrawling lines of Blake onto the desk's surface with a marker, dreamy and distracted. "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires," went one. The line gleamed like a talisman from another world.

But then a *Chronicle* editor reached out, asking whether I had any ideas for stories, and I said innocently, "I had sort of a funny thought that I might cover MLA 2019." It was as if I'd held onto academe's number in spite of myself.

My stated reasons for going were the ones everyone gives for reconnecting with an old flame: I craved closure. I felt a desire to be vindicated in my decision to break things off, and with it a morbid curiosity about what the profession had been up to since I left it. But perhaps this was all so much gauzy self-deception, a heap of self-flattering fictions beneath which lurked the real, unvarnished motive behind most such meetings: I was parched, and I missed it.

How can I conjure MLA 2019 for you?

Have you ever seen that viral picture from 2017 of a party of Oregon golfers calmly putting while, in the near distance, a wildfire consumes the landscape? Trees blacken; smoke, pinkish-gray, shrouds everything in impasto blots; nature itself seems to creak, groan, and at last give way. But the golfers go blithely on. The conversion of this Edenic place into Dantean incandescence won't interfere with the genteel game they know and love — or, if it will, they are determined to get in one last round before the region is razed. "Eye on the ball, Chet!" one can hear them saying. "Not on the cataclysm!"

Thus MLA 2019. In conference rooms located in the depths of the hotel, the field's most vigorous minds — Lauren Berlant! Bruce Robbins! — teed off powerfully before hushed spectators, launching fresh takes on everything from satire to the nature of critique. They often began the same way: with the stated intention to "trouble" or "disrupt" the existing paradigm by staging an "intervention." A windup would follow: "If, as Foucault suggests, …" the speaker would say, gathering might. Then a swing, swift and superb — the intervention sailed through the intellectual firmament, and, with luck, found its critical mark to the dazzlement of those present: birdies of theoretical acumen, eagles of originality.

Other scholars opted for modest putts, readings of Coleridge and Coetzee greeted by polite clapping. Now and then a bogey: A reading would be less than convincing, and the author would, during the Q&A, "get a little push-back" from one or more listeners (that's academese for "I'm not buying this"). It was all mannerly and urbane. People were getting in one last round.

Upstairs, the lobby served as a kind of clubhouse. There was a bar at the center with a restaurant beside it, and, at the outer edges of the room, furniture on which people lounged. In between was an open space populated by islands of academics who shared a self-conscious aesthetic that, in the case of the men, might be termed *formal-flippant*: hair mummified with product; scarf; sport coat; too-short khakis; and, like a bit of irreverent punctuation dropped at the end of some sartorial sentence, New Balances. A dozen women unwittingly wore the same suit from Ann Taylor, while myriad others went full flight attendant.

Old friends bumped into one another, clutching at lattés, trading news, dropping casual references to the "capitalocene." A scholar described some new project or life development; her friend nodded, wide-eyed and hypercaffeinated, uttering that trending expression of assent among the grotesquely overeducated: the rapid-fire "YahYahYah!"

All around them, the humanities burned. The number of jobs in English advertised on the annual MLA job list has declined by 55 percent since 2008; adjuncts now account for all but a quarter of college instructors generally. Whole departments are being extirpated by administrators with utilitarian visions; from 2013 to 2016, colleges cut 651 foreign-language programs. Meanwhile the number of English majors at most universities continues to swoon.

None of this shows any sign of relenting. It has, in fact, all the trappings of an extinction event that will alter English — and the rest of the humanities — irrevocably, though no one knows what it will leave in its wake. What's certain is that the momentum impelling it is far past halting; behind that momentum lies the avarice of universities, but also the determination of politicians and pundits to discredit humanistic thinking, which plainly threatens them. They have brought on a tipping point: The stories they have told about these disciplines — of their pointlessness, of the hollowness of anything lacking entrepreneurial value — have won out over the stories the humanists themselves have told, or not told.

"Have I stayed too late at something that is over and done?" asked Sheila Liming, an assistant professor at the University of North Dakota. Owing to enormous state-budget cuts, Liming told me, tenured and tenure-track faculty in her own department have lately been diminished by more than half. She likens herself and her colleagues to guests who have arrived at a party after last call. "That characterizes the morale of the people who come to this conference now. The project of academia might be over."

ILLUSTRATION BY JAN FEINDT FOR THE CHRONICLE

By evening I was down in the lobby hanging around the bar. I inhaled some offensively priced cut of grass-fed beef, charging it to *The Chronicle*, and became loosened by a trio of Bulleit Ryes. Numb-faced and cheerful, I decided it was time to start ambushing the academics at the bar. This seemed a decent way of taking the profession's pulse.

So I looked about for victims. I spotted a pair of men sitting across from each other in a booth, talking animatedly. One looked older than the other — roughly 80, hoary-headed and clad in a blazer. The other, though upward of 70, struck me as more boyish even from afar. He had a giddy laugh, a piercing glissando that spanned at least two octaves and sliced through the room's ambient noise. It wafted me to them.

"Hi, guys!" I slid in beside the younger of the two and introduced myself as a reporter. Their dialogue died immediately. The older man winced. I was a midge alighting between old friends, short-circuiting conversation. But I didn't care.

The younger guy introduced both of them: he was John Schilb, a professor at Indiana University at Bloomington and former editor of the journal *College English*. The older guy — who continued to eye me skeptically — was none other than Gerald Graff, a former president of MLA, author of numerous books on writing and the history of the profession, and a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He was once a big deal. "Gerald Graff," his website reads, "stands as the profession's indomitable and indispensable Arguer-in-Chief."

Graff went on studying me in silence, with a pained, almost pitying expression. "Hey, I'm not just some schmuck," I said finally. "I did a Ph.D. in English."

"That," Graff replied, "might actually make you a schmuck." I admit I was caught off-guard: it was as if a much older dog, one who had been sizing me up suspiciously at a distance, had now approached and mounted me. Two seconds of mute awkwardness ensued. But then Schilb released one of his shrieking glissandi, and I started laughing at that, and our overlaid laughter defused the moment, which passed.

Graff — who turned out to be a teddy bear — recalled his early days in the profession, during the 1960s. He described a field at once deeply flawed and more civil than it is now. "When I started out, the profession was very much an old boys' club," he said. "The big thing was, could you hold your liquor? That was a factor in hiring." As a new Stanford Ph.D., Graff found himself in a strong seller's market: "When I went out for a job, in '63, you had to really fight off employers. You got [solicitations] in the mail — from the University of Hawaii, USC — good, high-profile places."

It was a time of dumb-delirious plenty, during which refined men — men who had leapt unimpeded into careers of contemplation and comfort — politely debated the nature and import of poetry, drama, novels. An old historical scholarship, one that took a philological approach to literary works, vied with the New Criticism, which saw those works as transcendent objects, harmonized unities that rose above historical circumstance and aspired after universal meaning. "They were rivals in their writing," Graff remembered, "but they were actually social friends. Everyone was a gentleman then."

In the decades that followed, expansiveness of all kinds — the increased inclusion of women, the advent of a range of approaches that brought literary-critical methods to bear on every aspect of culture, from sexuality to disability — coincided with the shrinking of the field itself, its available jobs and funding. Already by 1977, when Schilb went on the market, there were signs of future collapse: "This job-market crisis now," Schilb emphasized, "has roots in the early '70s."

The fall from that time of ease and abundance — what might be termed Peak English — was a 50-year process stunningly accelerated by the 2008 recession. But the mere fact that there *was* a Peak English helped explain why so many older professors had difficulty grasping the magnitude of the current collapse — and why they have happily gone on accepting new Ph.D. students and grooming them for a future that doesn't exist. That these faculty came of age during Peak English — or closer to it, anyway, than their millennial counterparts, in a time of relative plenty — meant that many retained a maddeningly deluded vision of the market.

"*My* students get jobs," I recall being told by an older faculty member in my graduate department. "The market is bad," another coolly remarked once, "but it's not *that* bad." There was a beguiling hubris behind those words, bound up with these academics' need to reproduce themselves through their grad-student protégés — and, of course, to reap the benefits of cheap teaching labor. Far easier to inhabit these fantasies than reckon with the profession's extinction, and your own.

Graff, Schilb, and I shook hands in the end, fully friends, and I resumed wandering. At some point I looked up and saw, at a distance, a member of one of the many search committees that had rejected me over the years, surrounded by friends and talking jovially. It seemed to me that our eyes met for a moment. I turned aside with a start. Had she spotted me? Surely it didn't matter — but seeing her had thrown off my dopey-drunk equilibrium. I walked a lap around the lobby, ordered another neat rye, and went back to ambushing strangers.

It was past 9. I headed toward the men's room to freshen up. I had to get lucid; in 15 minutes I had a meeting with Caroline.

I stood at the bathroom sink splashing water onto my face, then peered at that face in the mirror. I was 36, nearly a decade older than when I'd first met Caroline Levine, the Victorian-literature scholar who became my dissertation adviser at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. It happened as I wandered through a Walgreens one day. I entered an aisle and saw this person I recognized from the department website, who looked laughably out of place in the store's crude, glaring light — this red-haired, Pre-Raphaelite figure standing among Starbursts and Herbal Essences. I blundered up and introduced myself, and we chatted easily.

"We should meet!" she said, meaning at her office. She said it with such homey, unaffected warmth, it was as if she were inviting me over for brownies and Capri Sun. I went. The meeting led to an independent study on Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Victorian poet and Jesuit priest, which led, in turn, to a dissertation on 19th-century poetry.

It was immediately apparent that she wasn't normal. Her feedback on my written work was instantaneous and staggeringly profuse. She sent me spontaneous emails "just checking in," or recommending a book, or observing that I'd looked downcast at some meeting we'd both attended, and was everything OK? She signed all these missives "C." — as if we'd attended 4-H Camp together. You could call her maternal — many did — but then you'd have to note that she was upsettingly insightful and prolific. In that tension lay the essence of Caroline: on the one hand, a Girl Scout den mom chairing departments and dissertations, ever cheerfully exhausted, ever proffering career advice like Thin Mints; on the other, some next-generation academic whose productivity, when you paused to think about it, scarcely made sense, obeyed some calculus that was other than human, and faintly disturbing.

At the time we met, I was still very much this dumb kid who played beer pong and poked people on Facebook. Yet here was a prominent academic on her way to the top of the profession, who'd discerned something in me and was determined to bring it out. So many high-powered professors couldn't care less about graduate students — scarcely know they exist — even though their 2-1 and 1-1 teaching loads depend on those students. That Caroline did was bewildering. What had she seen in me?

Email by email, meeting by meeting, she was building me up, like some sage trainer whipping a novice into fighting shape. Her praise was transfiguring; I came to believe it. I landed an article in a major journal, nabbed a fellowship or two — and felt myself changing: each essay or chapter was a new lap run, a fresh foe bested. The time came to go on the market. We did mock interviews, sat at her house poring over sample syllabi I'd drawn up. The market was brutal, we both knew — "But you'll land on your feet, of course," she predicted.

Except I wound up supine on the mat.

The thing you have to understand is the wrenching strain placed on these relationships when the advisee doesn't get a job. If your adviser cares deeply, they watch from your corner as you endure this drawn-out bludgeoning, watch your life's prospects shift and attenuate; they watch as your worldview turns rancid, as the nature and meaning of the time you spent together, all the numberless hours, curdle in hindsight. All this they see from a place of secure employment, having themselves the thing you need. You may even come to resent your adviser for a time, even if they've funneled untold amounts of unpaid labor into your work. It's irrational, of course, but you may do it all the same, because the alternative is to shift your gaze inward and confront this ghastly wound that's opened inside you.

At the very end, in summer 2016, I drove to Caroline's house. She'd gotten an endowed chair at Cornell University and was moving. I went bearing a pear torte I had baked, along with a card thanking her for her tutelage over the years. (I'd taken to making baroque desserts to keep my hands busy and my mind occupied, the way some people immerse themselves in odd jobs after someone close to them has died.)

I rang the doorbell and Caroline answered and invited me in, and we stood talking amid a sea of U-Haul boxes. It was one of those conversations that consist entirely of small talk, but behind the small talk lurk a million implicit meanings. By sheer indirection, I managed to convey that I wasn't going on the market again and had no precise plans moving forward.

There was a long pause. I turned to leave. "I'm still your adviser," Caroline suddenly said. It took me aback. I smiled weakly and thanked her, but instead of hugging her I reiterated how important it was to keep the torte refrigerated. She nodded kindly, and I left.

A couple weeks later, I took a job as a bartender, listing Caroline as my reference. I hadn't seen her since — until now.

ILLUSTRATION BY JAN FEINDT FOR THE CHRONICLE

Minutes after greeting each other, we were seated at a table and chatting away. We leapt back into our old, easy rapport. I fell anew for her ready laughter and warm, artless charm, her exaggerated nodding after I said a thing, coupled with a loud and nasally "Mmmmmmmmm-hmm!" How reassuring these tics had been to me once!

Beneath that good cheer, though, she was melancholy. She had ascended to the top of the profession precisely as it collapsed. "I've always prided myself on being part of this large scholarly formation that has longevity and collective input, this glacial — " She caught herself. "I can't even say 'glacier' anymore, now that the real ones are melting!" We both laughed ruefully. "And now I feel like we might die altogether. So what are we contributing to, exactly?" Whatever remained of English departments after the extinction event, there would be "less stuff," she said. "Fewer texts will emerge as the ones we read."

I weighed this. Glaciers of accretive knowledge, the products of decades, were melting. Something was sweeping across the literary-studies landscape, and when it was done, that landscape would lie despoiled, its biodiversity starved to sparseness. In 40 years, English departments, if they existed at all, might manage to cover the grandest specimens — Morrison and Milton, say. But what of more-exotic fauna, like Victorian poetry?

I drew a breath and switched gears. "Are you … cool with what I'm doing now?" I said. I'm perfectly aware that this sounds needy and boyish: Who cared how I'd gone on to make ends meet after academe coughed me up? I could have become a pole-dancer and wouldn't have owed my Ph.D. program any explanation. And yet I found I wanted to know.

She looked at me unswervingly. "I am *totally* cool with what you're doing now. It seems really meaningful and valuable, and it draws on your training in interesting ways."

"All those hours, though!" I said, more desperately than I'd meant. Hours unspooled from both our lives, irretrievable now: a yardage of years.

"But that wasn't wasted time!" she said. "I don't ever think intellectual inquiry is wasted. I actually think a Ph.D. is a great thing. Provided you're not in debt, you're spending six or seven years creating knowledge."

The humanities are in the midst of an extinction event. No one knows what it will leave in its wake.

I thought a moment. "Had you known from the very beginning that I wouldn't get a tenure-track job — that I would end up doing this — would you still have agreed to be my adviser?"

"Absolutely," she said. "I like the idea of this kind of knowledge dispersing into lots of institutions and corners of life. I mean, as long as you didn't ultimately *want* this thing that you didn't — that this world around us couldn't give you, then yes. There's no question in my mind, I would've agreed to."

I had to admit I was happy that a Ph.D. had been a potent prologue to my current life, disciplining me into a more patient thinker, a slicker architect of arguments. Asinine and medieval it had certainly been, in many ways — prelims! The dissertation itself! — and had taken time, tracts and tracts of it. But the tracts of time — seemingly an endless postponement — had turned out to be their own reward, not least because I'd gotten to spend them with the person across the table, who'd built me up and modeled a new intellectual intensity for me.

"I brought a poem," I said, taking out my phone. It was "God's Grandeur," the Hopkins poem about industrialization and its ruinous impact on a natural world suffused with holiness — a timely lyric for 2019. (It was the first poem we'd read together during that independent study in 2010.) I read the first of its two stanzas aloud, then handed the phone to Caroline, who read the second, and when she finished we stood up. This time I hugged her. "Thank you for everything," I said.

I woke the next morning with a hangover. I looked at my phone: it was the three-year anniversary of my finished dissertation.

The occasion always reminded me of Samuel Pepys, the 17th-century English diarist. He suffered from a hideous bladder stone — the best metaphor I know for a doctoral dissertation. Daily it accumulated inside him, drop by drop of minerals that hardened into a little globe. At last it grew impossible to live with, so he underwent surgery sans anesthesia: multiple men held him down while a physician incised his perineum and tweezed it out, a mass the size of a tennis ball. It had no purpose; it was a useless curiosity. Pepys kept it in his house as a grisly souvenir; I keep my dissertation in a bedroom drawer. He commemorated the removal with an annual party; I raise a glass each January to my freedom and lightness.

I showered, dressed, and headed to the elevator, where a young man from Seton Hall University effused to a peer: "If you practice dialectic in the antinomian way that Adorno lays out, then you can't achieve the synthesis Hegel envisions." I stared straight ahead.

Downstairs, wide-eyed scholars skipped to panels, kids let loose at Six Flags. I wandered among them, surrounded but unrecognized, like a ghost come back to a world once its own. I followed the current to a panel on Romanticism, where a presenter argued for "the now-ness of Foucault's *Archaeology*." I was relieved to discover that I didn't give a damn. All I could think was how strange it was that this was the endpoint of falling in love with, and dedicating your life to, poems about people striding through the Alps and glimpsing sublimity: you wound up in a hotel room far below the ground, where the air was awful and people talked at you in a weird, creepy language — a language that had somehow attached itself to poetry the way the titular creature clings to John Hurt's face in *Alien* and won't let go. That language washed over me anew: *palimpsest*, still the only term academics have managed to come up with for shit with layers; *imbrication*, which sounds like a malady preventable by eating bran muffins.

I ducked out during the Q&A. So far, so good: I was unaffected, I still hated conferences. I started hitting up more panels, developing a formula I would follow in the course of the event: drop into panel, claim spot in back corner, take in talks with manspreading complacency, daring someone to move me.

At one panel, an eminent professor of comparative literature, speaking at roughly 600 words a minute and in a manner reminiscent of those old Micro Machines commercials, suggested that while language was obviously a flawed medium — handmaid of ideology, prison house of signs — we might be circling back to a place where we can comfortably say stuff. He advanced this claim with surpassing caution, all the while making use of a prodigious amount of language. At another, a British academic clad in a winter jacket, assuming a bearing akin to that of the Dos Equis guy, imagined a more equitable academy for the future: "The pluriversity," he breathed, emanating mystery like strong aftershave, "would exist as a networked decoloniality."

And yet many of these scholars were trying, with poignant earnestness, for dynamism and accessibility. At a pair of featured events called "Humanities in Five," academics were challenged to present their research in the form of five-minute elevator speeches shorn of jargon. One presenter — Michael Bérubé, a scholar of American literature and a sort of ersatz Alec Baldwin — spoke of the liberating potential of science fiction that featured people with disabilities, and of the virtues of "making stuff up." "Who the hell fell asleep and let the business theorists lay a proprietary claim to the term *creativity*?" he demanded, with Baldwin-esque abrasiveness. "Excuse me: Creativity is *our* gig."

It was a panel on "The Persistence of Ideology Critique" that threw me. On my browser, I had open the academic-jobs wiki, the site where anonymous applicants make updates to advertised positions in higher education, and where interested parties can go to track the real-time progress of those posts. Below each job listing are subheads representing the various stages of the hiring process — "Preliminary Interview," "Campus Interview," "Job Offer," and so on — and if candidates get, say, a campus interview or offer, they write an update alongside the relevant subhead. (Seeing others' favorable updates to jobs for which I'd interviewed had, during my days on the market, been a bit like doing shots of Roundup.) On a whim, I started making fake updates. I accepted tons of offers: offers in the 18th century, offers in early American literature, offers in my old specialty area. Offers in political science, in piano pedagogy. All the offers. "Offer accepted, motha****aaas!" I wrote below one.

You could say I was coming unraveled. At some point, though, a presenter began reading a paper that caused me to look up at once from the wiki. This was Anna Kornbluh, of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her paper was written in the same language as the others, but scythelike; she plied the language with weird skill, as if slicing a path toward some promontory of insight — and I found, to my surprise and unease, that I wanted to follow her there and stand and look out.

Her thesis was unsparing. "We have rhapsodized demolition as liberation while literally laying ruin to the university," she argued, "a horror to be beheld by future historians — in the unlikely event there are any." Literary theorists, by prizing an ethos of destruction in the name of freedom, had ironically aligned themselves with the external forces — political, administrative — that had for years conspired to obliterate the institution in which they work.

"Human beings," though, "are essentially builders," she noted, channeling Marx — "architects of ideas" as well as topplers of norms. Both gestures, affirmation and dissent, are "life-sustaining"; ideally they coexist, equipoised, twin components of a fulfilled life. A reconstructed university — and wider world — would depend on recovering the constructive and visionary impulse, which the profession had too long devalued in favor of critique. "Get building," she enjoined the room.

I sought out Kornbluh afterward. "What does it mean," I asked, "to be 'essentially a builder' in an institution that's burning? Isn't it too late for building at this point?"

"There's no more urgent time than 'too late'!" she said. "We need to build up animating stories about how reading, writing, and thinking support human flourishing. And we have to build up the university by unionizing, by fighting administrative bloat, and by committing more to service work, which too often gets belittled and falls to women." She thought for a moment. "The threat of extinction — not just academic extinction but human extinction in worsening ecological conditions — is a vicious one that calls for wild imaginings, which is exactly what the humanities enable."

I walked off grappling with this — and grappling, too, with the wider implications of all I'd seen. I saw a guild struggling, with tragic belatedness, against something furious and overmastering that was baked into their future and would go on ravaging them until they were changed, perhaps beyond recognition. Whether they themselves had helped set the devastation in motion — by espousing an ethos of demolition that backfired; by failing to communicate themselves to a wider world and thereby leaving a vacuum in the public discourse around what they did and why it mattered, which their enemies eagerly filled — seemed a question infinitely debatable. But there was terrible pathos in the lateness of their confronting the threat, and in the threat's sheer hopeless scale, which dwarfed their tools for combating it. It was too late. But then there was no more urgent time than too late.

I returned to the lobby filled with an unwelcome nostalgia: I was antsy with all the elevated talk of poems and novels. So I went up to my room to do a hit of something and settled on Hart Crane, the modernist poet whose verses — ecstatic, transporting — are like verbal speed. I put on a recording of Tennessee Williams reading "The Broken Tower," Crane's best poem, sat back and absorbed it, veritably snorted it, letting its high-flying stanzas hit my brain. I did line after line.

Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to talk about it with someone. There were perhaps 50 people in the world who were intimately familiar with "The Broken Tower," and I imagined that half of them were in this hotel. By Sunday they would be gone, returned to their far-flung lives. Should I look for an amateur book club when I got back home to Wisconsin, one where retirees sat about analyzing extremely difficult poetry over Rice Krispies Treats and Yoo-hoo?

The conference seemed, like the profession itself, to have run out of steam. In hopes of completing my pulse-taking of the field, I set about talking with a few people at the bottom of it, followed by one at the very top. Among the former — contingent academics, that is — the prevailing mood was, of course, far from sanguine. I had the sense that, overshadowed as they were by this unfolding calamity, all were trying to determine how to live with and feel about it.

"Something sociological is happening that's larger than any of us," said Jacob Tootalian, a scholar of early modern literature who recently served as a digital teaching fellow at the University of South Florida. "It's mind-boggling, the sheer ideas that are being pushed out. Academia feels like the opening lines of Ginsberg's 'Howl.' "

Later I met with Anne Ruggles Gere, at the time president of the MLA. She received me in an empty conference room, where we talked amicably of the extinction event: Gere noted that her home department, the English department at the University of Michigan, had witnessed a drop from 1,000 English majors to 200 during the previous eight years.

"Do you feel a bit like the captain of the *Titanic*?" I said.

"No," she said. "I don't know why, but I tend to take a more positive view. I think the changes that I'm seeing in the way MLA is functioning are cause for hope. I think we need to do a lot more educating of faculty, and of English departments, about how to rethink what they're doing. But I think it's possible. We're talking about smart people."

"So what are some of the other things that are now being done to make this a more humane experience for young scholars?" I asked.

"Which is 'this'?" she said.

"The experience of being at MLA, or just being on the market."

"The first thing to say is that interviewing at MLA is no longer the thing," she said. "And that, I think, changes the environment here." She recalled her first MLA, in the 1970s, just after Peak English: "The sort of dominant scene was these frantic people clutching their briefcases, and looking at their watches, and hoping to God that somebody was going to call them, because they had come maybe with one interview," she said. "I haven't seen much of that here."

It was true: Most preliminary interviews had migrated to Skype, though I still encountered plenty of interviewees who'd flown to the conference on their own dime. But while this change saved interviewees much time and money, it was hard to ignore the fact that this was a surface-level fix — that academe remains one of the few professions that produce their own work forces, and that, wherever the interviews are happening, there are still immeasurably fewer of them than there are Ph.D.s.

"Do you have any advice for people like me who've left the profession and are seeking to make meaning of their time in academia, and looking to find fulfilling lives outside of the academy?" I asked.

A long pause ensued. "I — I don't think I have any basis for — no," she said finally.

ILLUSTRATION BY JAN FEINDT FOR THE CHRONICLE

There was one thing I had left to do.

I made my way back to my room, where I took out my phone and opened an app called Zoom. I had arranged a video conference call that was to start momentarily.

One by one they arrayed themselves before me on my phone's screen, in tiles that bore their faces *Brady Bunch*-style. They were the finest souls with whom I had grown acquainted in grad school. And they were suddenly, all of them, gazing at me and blinking.

In one tile was Gary, a Renaissance scholar and my beloved office mate. Gary had no life to speak of beyond literature; all his internet passwords were "Renaissance." Many were the mornings I arrived at the office to find Gary asleep with his head on his desk, having spent the night there. He lived on Nutri-Grain bars and Haribos.

Another tile contained Wes: a stout blond man eternally in gingham, possessed of a falsetto laugh and quicksilver temper, and one of the world's authorities on *Paradise Regained*. In the afterlife, Wes and Gary will wander through Hades together, descanting on Milton and *The Lord of the Rings* movies.

A third tile showed Katherine, who had a serrated wit that could flay you in an instant and make you giggle at your own peeled body. A hummingbird aflutter with nervous energy, she spoke in breathy mumbles, so that you had to strain to hear each witticism. Her hair was electric.

A fourth displayed my roommate for the best stretch of grad school, an American-literature scholar. Irritatingly handsome, this guy, and an emotional savant who could've been a therapist but happened to really like Robert Frost. I'll call him Ken.

None of us had gotten a tenure-track professorship.

"God, you guys have no idea how much I've needed you!" I said. "This conference is such a debacle, and no one here knows me, and my GI system is a wreck. I've slept hideously." I felt like crying.

"You do everything hideously," said Katherine.

"What about a therapeutic Keats suppository?" said Ken.

I felt my health flooding back.

We fell to reminiscing about the best of grad school: the most exhilarating seminars; all-night parties like frenzied Maypole celebrations wherein we'd dressed up as Prufrock or Flannery O'Connor, irrigated ourselves with martinis, leapt onto one another's backs.

"What do you think was the most powerful thing about it all, in hindsight?" I asked.

"The cohesive group thing," said Katherine. Everyone concurred. "For me there's never been that same ensemble-y dynamic, though I've looked for it," she went on. "It's just so hard to separate academe from friendship. There were times when I thought about quitting the Ph.D. program, and told other grad students, and they were like, 'Aren't you worried about losing your friends?' "

"So true," said Wes. "There was something almost militaristic about grad school, and not necessarily in a bad way. We were all thrown into the trenches together. We were really *doing* it! There was this sense that we were being broken down and built up again as new people, as these high-powered minds — only without the groupthink that gets enforced in a barracks. Do you guys remember how weird it felt to go home for a visit after that first initiation?"

This struck an immediate chord with us all. The triviality and isolation of life "on the outside," with its strip malls and Snapchat, had nothing to rival academe's camaraderie, its shared intellectual fervor.

"I'm not just some schmuck," I said. "I did a Ph.D. in English."

"Everyone calls the academy a cult," I said. "But it might just be a community." I thought back to my own experience quitting — how I'd spent nights wandering the maze of streets around my house: a threadless Theseus. I saw now that I had been mourning not simply the death of a career I thought might be mine, but an intellectual community. I had come back to MLA unconsciously searching for that community, and had caught glimpses of it — at the bar, at the best panels — but recognized that it was closed to me now.

"I'm realizing," said Gary, "there's another thing that links all of us: the 2011 protests and all that followed them." He meant the convening of multitudes at the Wisconsin state Capitol to decry then-governor Scott Walker's "Budget Repair Bill," which aimed to deprive state employees of the ability to collectively bargain. The intent behind the bill was to decimate the public sector, the university system included, by breaking its unions and thereby preventing its workers from staging any unified opposition to the mandates of the state.

At least 60,000 demonstrators descended on Madison at one point, deluging the Capitol — beating drums, playing bagpipes, chanting. There were all-night sit-ins in the Capitol itself. One night I walked through the building's marble corridors in the small hours, taking it all in. I slalomed through sleeping bags, past protesters working on signs, strumming guitars. I saw Wes, Gary, and another peer huddled together reading *The Faerie Queene* by the rotunda, discussing it quietly and grading. The stakes of reading Spenser had never seemed so great, nor the power of poetry to magnetize.

The bill passed despite all the resistance. Hard on its heels, Walker enacted a series of budget cuts that resulted in a loss of $362 million for the UW system from 2012 to 2017. And in 2015 he sought furtively to edit the system's mission statement (the "Wisconsin Idea"), deleting phrases like "search for truth" and replacing them with "meet the state's workforce needs."

In the wider context of the extinction event, this stands out as an especially grievous disaster. "The melancholy thing," Gary said, "is that it took the GOP assault on the UW to get me to realize how important the education I was getting was, and why it was significant for me to bring that to others. My moment of recognition was precisely when it was becoming clear that only a few of us would move on to the secure professoriate."

In retrospect, these losses seem like the death throes of the quaint monastic world to which we briefly belonged. Now it was hastening toward its end — and I saw that I'd come to MLA to compose a mental elegy for that world and for my time in it. At its best, it had cultivated that sense of togetherness we all remembered so wistfully, offering invitational spaces — classroom, conference, seminar — where people of every stripe might gather around works of verbal art in shared experiences of wonder. There they could assemble, at reservoirs of eloquence and vision — mingling, puzzling, praising — then filter back into lives transfigured and refreshed, reminded that they belonged to something larger.

At its worst, this world was synonymous with egotism and the isolation that is egotism's endpoint: scholars with tumorous self-regard bragging about never attending a conference panel other than their own; writing opaque and narcissistic prose in love with its own argot; disdaining service work; forgetting — or blocking out — the grad students and adjuncts who rendered their privileged lifestyles possible.

Time was running out. "I have to go, you guys," said Katherine.

"Me too," I said. I had a bus to catch.

"This has been surprisingly cathartic," said Wes.

"It really has," said Ken. "How come we've never done it before?"

We made plans to do it again.

A version of this article appeared in the May 24, 2019, issue.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

Correction (May 13, 2019, 2:55 p.m.): John Schilb is a former editor of the journal College English, not the editor, as this essay originally said. In addition, he is a professor at Indiana University at Bloomington, not the University of Indiana. The text has been corrected accordingly.

About the Author

Andrew Kay

Andrew Kay is a writer living in Madison, Wis.