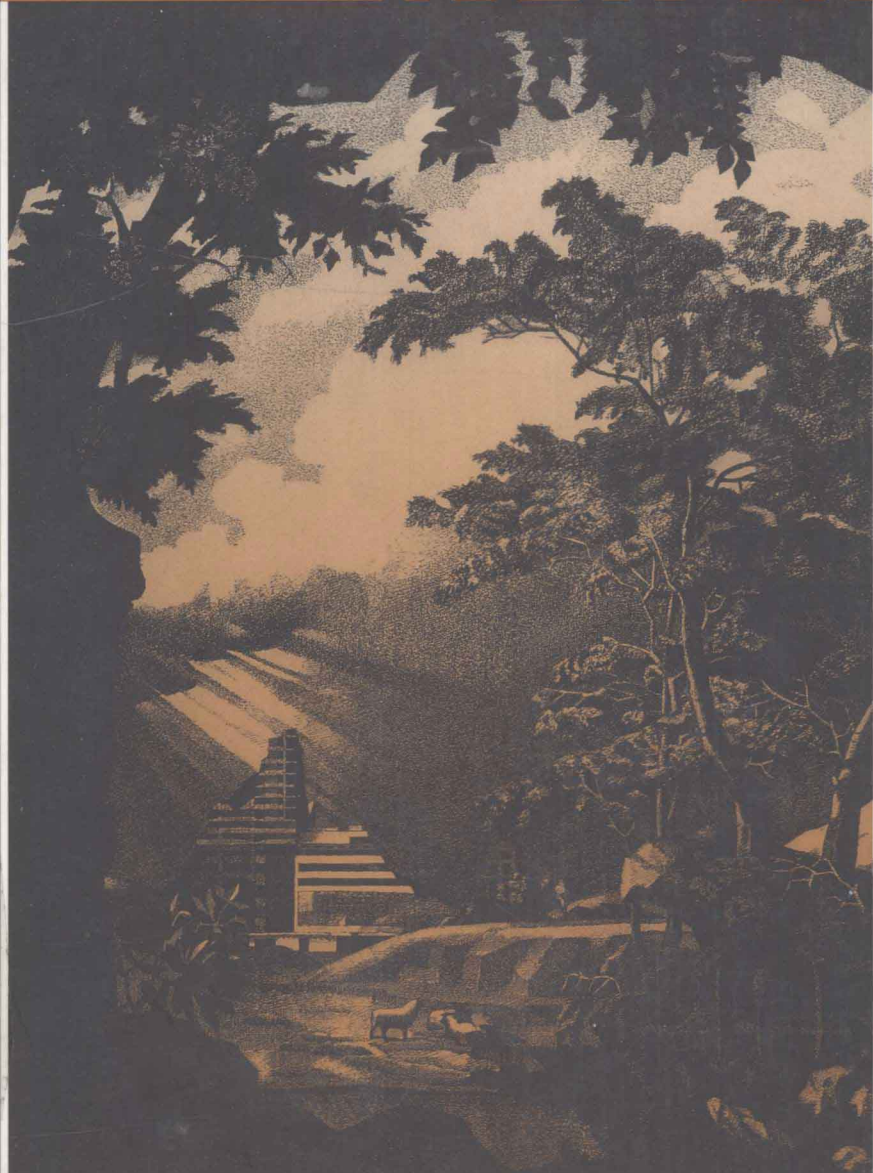


the

bill readings

UNIVERSITY

IN RUINS



≈ BILL READINGS

# *The University in Ruins*

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## ≈ Foreword

Bill Readings was in the process of making the final revisions to this book when he died in the crash of American Eagle flight 4184 on October 31, 1994. I completed the revisions on which Bill was working, taking his notes and our many conversations as my guide.

Editing each other's work was once just something Bill and I did. At the time, it never seemed extraordinary; it never seemed like something that would need to be talked about, something that would mark, as it does now, the line dividing life from death. Revision and conversation—with me, with friends and colleagues, with students—were Bill's way of trying to create possibilities for thinking together.

If there is anything I could say about how this book evolved, how Bill imagined it would continue to evolve, it would have to be in terms of the many conversations that informed it and the many more that he hoped would follow from it. Dwelling in the ruins of the University was not usually a silent occasion for Bill. Talk—whether it led to agreement or disagreement, whether it was serious or silly—had everything to do with how he worked, thought, and envisioned a future for the University.

To say that conversation with Bill can never again take place is to acknowledge the painful finality of his death. And to insist on talk as a part of the very fabric of this book is perhaps a step toward acknowledging the singularity of a voice, a place, and a time which would not exist apart from the University.

Diane Elam  
Montréal, 1995



## ≈ Acknowledgments

It is hard work to be excellent, since in each case it is hard work to find what is intermediate.

Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*

The writing of this book has been made possible in the first place by grants from the Québec Fonds pour la Formation de Chercheurs et l'Aide à la Recherche and the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Besides the infrastructural support that these grants have provided, they have enabled me to work in collaboration with other members, both students and faculty, of the research team "L'Université et la Culture: La Crise Identitaire d'une Institution" at the Université de Montréal, and to benefit from a number of important conversations with speakers invited by the group. The main argument of this book was developed in the course of directing a pluridisciplinary seminar at the Université de Montréal on the topic "La Culture et ses Institutions," and I am grateful to the students, faculty, and members of the community who participated. My pressing sense of the urgency of the question of the University as an institution of culture goes back even further, to the beginnings of a number of debates with former colleagues at the Université de Genève and at Syracuse University. An invitation from the graduate students of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the State University of New York at Buffalo first made me aware that I had something that I wanted to say on the topic. Further productive opportunities to test the general argument were offered by conferences at the University of Western Ontario, the State University of New York at Stonybrook, the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change at the University of Virginia, Trent

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University, the University of California at Irvine and at San Diego, the University of Wales at Cardiff, Stirling University, and the Université de Genève. Finally, my thanks are due to Gilles Dupuis and Sean Spurvey for preparing the index.

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I have forborne to name the individuals who have influenced this book because they are so many and because I am not sure whether I would be doing them a favor. I will, however, take the risk of mentioning by name the person who first made me aware that the University could be a place to think: Ann Wordsworth. She taught me about something that Oxford called "Critical Theory" and she did so on a short-term contract, teaching in a hut in the garden of one of the brick mansions of North Oxford. I dedicate this book to her.

Bill Readings

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## *Introduction*

Jeremiads abound concerning the “betrayal” and “bankruptcy” of the project of liberal education.<sup>1</sup> Teaching, we are told, is undervalued in favor of research, while research is less and less in touch with the demands of the real world, or with the comprehension of the “common reader.” Nor is this—as some academics seem to believe—just the lament of the middlebrow media, motivated by media commentators’ resentment at their failure to gain access to the hallowed groves of academe. Forever deprived of the chance to sit on the Faculty Promotions Committee, such pundits, it is claimed, take out their frustrations on the University, constrained as they are to content themselves with huge salaries and comfortable working conditions. The causes of the media’s sniping at the University are not individual resentments but a more general uncertainty as to the role of the University and the very nature of the standards by which it should be judged as an institution. It is no coincidence that such attacks are intensifying in North America at the same time as the structure of the academic institution is shifting.

It is not merely that the professoriat is being proletarianized as a body and the number of short-term or part-time contracts at major institutions increased (with the concomitant precipitation of a handful of highly paid stars).<sup>2</sup> The production of knowledge within the University is equally uncertain. An internal legitimation struggle concerning the nature of the knowledge produced in the humanities, for ex-

ample, would not take on crisis proportions were it not accompanied by an external legitimization crisis. Disputes within individual disciplines as to methods and theories of research would not hit the headlines, were it not that the very notion of a research project is now a troubled one. Thus, the impulse behind this book is not simply to argue that the University needs to recognize that new theoretical advances in particle physics or literary studies render old paradigms of study and teaching obsolete. Nor is this book simply another attempt to engage with the web of conflicting and often contradictory sentiments that currently surround the University. Rather, I want to perform a structural diagnosis of contemporary shifts in the University's function as an institution, in order to argue that the wider social role of the University as an institution is now up for grabs. It is no longer clear what the place of the University is within society nor what the exact nature of that society is, and the changing institutional form of the University is something that intellectuals cannot afford to ignore.

But first, some preliminary warnings. In this book I will focus on a certain Western notion of the University, which has been widely exported and whose current mutation seems likely to continue to frame the terms of transnational discussion. If I also pay particular attention to the changes currently occurring in the North American University, this is because the process of "Americanization" cannot be understood as simply the expansion of U.S. cultural hegemony. In fact, I shall argue, "Americanization" in its current form is a synonym for globalization, a synonym that recognizes that globalization is not a neutral process in which Washington and Dakar participate equally. The obverse of this inequitable coin is that the process of expropriation by transnational capital that globalization names is something from which the United States and Canada are currently suffering, a process graphically described by the study of Flint, Michigan, in the film *Roger and Me*. The film's director, Michael Moore, traces the profound impoverishment of the once-rich town of Flint, as a result of the flight of capital to more profitable areas—despite the fact that General Motors was in relatively good economic health at the time of the plant closings. The resulting devastation of Flint (after failed attempts to make it into a tourist destination by opening the "Autoworld" theme park) means

that the majority of new jobs available there today are in minimum-wage service industries. “Americanization” today names less a process of national imperialism than the generalized imposition of the rule of the cash-nexus in place of the notion of national identity as determinant of all aspects of investment in social life. “Americanization,” that is, implies the end of national culture.

The current shift in the role of the University is, above all, determined by the decline of the national cultural mission that has up to now provided its *raison d'être*, and I will argue that the prospect of the European Union places the universities of Europe under a similar horizon, both in the states of the European Union and in Eastern Europe, where projects such as those of George Soros sketch a similar separation of the University from the idea of the nation-state.<sup>3</sup> In short, the University is becoming a different kind of institution, one that is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture. The process of economic globalization brings with it the relative decline of the nation-state as the prime instance of the reproduction of capital around the world. For its part, the University is becoming a transnational bureaucratic corporation, either tied to transnational instances of government such as the European Union or functioning independently, by analogy with a transnational corporation. The recent publication by UNESCO of Alfonso Borrero Cabal's *The University as an Institution Today* provides a good example of the terms in which this move towards the status of a bureaucratic corporation may occur.<sup>4</sup> Borrero Cabal focuses upon the *administrator* rather than the professor as the central figure of the University, and figures the University's tasks in terms of a generalized logic of “accountability” in which the University must pursue “excellence” in all aspects of its functioning. The current crisis of the University in the West proceeds from a fundamental shift in its social role and internal systems, one which means that the centrality of the traditional humanistic disciplines to the life of the University is no longer assured.

In making such a wide-ranging diagnosis, I am, of course, going to tend to ignore the process of uneven and combined development, the different speeds at which the discourse of “excellence” replaces the

ideology of (national) culture in various institutions and various countries. For instance, in a move that might seem to head in the opposite direction to that suggested by my argument about the nation-state, the British conservative party is currently attempting to install a uniform “national curriculum.” The proposed educational “reforms” in Britain are not, however, inconsistent with what I will be arguing. This is a book about the spinning off of *tertiary* education from the nation-state, and such a move will probably accentuate the structural differences between secondary education and universities, especially as concerns their link to the state. Furthermore, the fact that an institution as ancient as New College, Oxford, should have begun to attach an announcement of its dedication to “excellence” to all public announcements such as job advertisements seems to me more indicative of long-term trends in higher education.

Just as this book will focus on a certain “Americanization” that moves the University further away from direct ties to the nation-state, it will also tend to privilege the humanities in its attempt to understand what is going on in the contemporary University. This emphasis likewise needs a few words of preliminary explanation. In choosing to focus on the notion of “culture” as I do, I may give the impression that the humanities are the essence of the University, the place where the University’s sociopolitical mission is accomplished. This would be unfortunate for at least two important reasons. First, I do not believe the natural sciences to be positivist projects for the neutral accumulation of knowledge, which are therefore in principle sheltered from sociopolitical troubles. As I shall argue, the *decline* of the nation-state—and I do believe that despite resurgent nationalisms the nation-state is declining—and the end of the Cold War are having a significant effect on the funding and organization of the natural sciences. Secondly, the separation between the humanities and the sciences is not as absolute as the University’s own disciplinary walls may lead one to believe. The natural sciences take their often extremely powerful place in the University *by analogy* with the humanities. This is particularly the case when it comes to the sources of the narratives in terms of which pedagogy is understood. For example, when I asked a recipient of the Nobel Prize for physics to describe what he understood to be the goal of

undergraduate education in physics, he replied that it was to introduce students to “the culture of physics.”<sup>5</sup> His drawing on C. P. Snow seems to me both very canny and fair, given that the contested status of knowledge in physics—the fact that undergraduates learn things that they will later discard if they pursue their studies—requires a model of knowledge as a *conversation* among a community rather than as a simple accumulation of facts. It is in terms of a model of the institutionalization of knowledge of which the humanities—and especially departments of philosophy and national literature—have been the historical guardians that the institutional fact of the natural sciences in the University has to be understood. In this sense, the general thrust of my argument that the notion of culture as the legitimating idea of the modern University has reached the end of its usefulness may be understood to apply to the natural sciences as well as to the humanities, although it is in the humanities that the delegitimation of culture is most directly perceived as a threat.<sup>6</sup>

As someone who teaches in a humanities department (although one that bears almost no resemblance to the department in which I was “trained”), I have written this book out of a deep ambivalence about an institution: it is an attempt to think my way out of an impasse between militant radicalism and cynical despair. I am still inclined to introduce sentences that begin “In a *real* University . . .” into discussions with my colleagues, even though they know, and I know that they know, that no such institution has ever existed. This would not be a problem were it not that such appeals to the true nature of the institution no longer seem to me to be honest: it is no longer the case, that is, that we can conceive the University within the historical horizon of its self-realization. The University, I will claim, no longer participates in the historical project for humanity that was the legacy of the Enlightenment: the historical project of culture. Such a claim also raises some significant questions of its own: Is this a new age dawning for the University as a project, or does it mark the twilight of the University’s critical and social function? And if it is the twilight, then what does that mean?

Some might want to call this moment to which I am referring the “postmodernity” of the University. After all, one of the most discussed

books on postmodernity is Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, a study of the implications of the questions posed to the legitimation of knowledge by postmodernity. Lyotard's book is explicitly framed as a report on the University for the government of Québec, a report which doubtless was something of a disappointment to its patrons, despite its later success. Lyotard argues that it is written "at this very Postmodern moment that finds the University nearing what may be its end."<sup>7</sup> The question of the postmodern is a question posed to the University as much as in the University. Yet since the postmodern has by and large ceased to function as a question and has become another alibi in the name of which intellectuals denounce the world for failing to live up to their expectations, I prefer to drop the term. The danger is apparent: it is so easy to slip into speaking of the "post-modern University" as if it were an imaginable institution, a newer, more critical institution, which is to say, *an even more modern* University than the modern University. I would prefer to call the contemporary University "posthistorical" rather than "postmodern" in order to insist upon the sense that the institution has outlived itself, is now 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.

What I think becomes apparent here is that to speak of the University and the state is also to tell a story about the emergence of the notion of culture. I shall argue that the University and the state as we know them are essentially *modern* institutions, and that the emergence of the concept of culture should be understood as a particular way of dealing with the tensions between these two institutions of modernity. However, before anyone gets the wrong idea, this is not because I am simply going to bash the University. I work in a University—sometimes I feel I live in it. It is far too easy simply to critique the University, and there is hardly anything new in doing so. After all, the specificity of the modern University that the German Idealists founded was its status as the site of critique. As Fichte put it, the University exists not to teach information but to inculcate the exercise of critical judgment.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, it might seem that all critiques of the modern University are

internal policy documents that do not affect the deep structure of the institutionalization of thought.

It is also worth mentioning right from the beginning that when I speak of the “modern” University I am referring to the German model, widely copied, that Humboldt instituted at the University of Berlin and that still served for the postwar expansion of tertiary education in the West. I would argue that we are now in the twilight of this model, as the University becomes posthistorical. In this context, Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* seems to me to be more in touch with reality than the liberal nostrums of Jaroslav Pelikan in his *The Idea of the University*, which recalls us to a lost mission of liberal education.<sup>9</sup> Bloom’s conservative jeremiad at least recognizes that the autonomy of knowledge as an end in itself is threatened, because there is no longer a *subject* that might incarnate this principle, hence Bloom’s repeated ridiculing of much of what goes on in the University as unintelligible and irrelevant to any student (read young-white-male-American student). Pelikan, on the other hand, prefaces his work with a Newmanesque pun that suggests that *The Idea of the University* might well have been retitled *Apologia pro vita sua*. This pun arouses my suspicion because I am inclined to agree with Bloom’s conclusion that the story of what he calls “the adventure of a liberal education” no longer has a hero.<sup>10</sup> Neither a student hero to embark upon it, nor a professor hero as its end.

Some sense of how this came about can be grasped from reading a text such as Jacques Barzun’s *The American University: How It Runs, Where It Is Going*.<sup>11</sup> This work, which dates from 1968, has recently been reprinted by the University of Chicago Press, a remarkable feat for a text that claims a contemporary relevance in the 1990s and yet which was self-consciously out of date at the time of its first publication. Barzun remarks in a May 1968 postscript to the January 1968 preface (an ironic locus if ever there were one)<sup>12</sup> that he sees “no reason to change or add to the substance” of a text completed six weeks prior to the student “outbreak of April 23 [1968] that disrupted the work of Columbia University” (xxxvi). This insouciance might seem strange in a work centered on the question of how an administrator is to act. Yet

it is less paradoxical once we realize that the narrative upon which Barzun is engaged is that of the production of the enlightened and liberal administrator as the new hero of the story of the University. Thus Barzun explicitly proposes the formation of an autonomous stratum of non-academic administrators within the University, a “second layer”: “If caught young, such men [*sic*] can become top civil-servants and be accepted as professionals without being scholars; they can enjoy a prestige of their own and share fully in the amenities that are widely believed to adorn campus life; and they can do more than any other agency, human or electronic, to render efficient the workings of the great machine” (19). The central figure of the University is no longer the professor who is both scholar and teacher but the provost to whom both these apparatchiks and the professors are answerable. The difference between Barzun and Newman is that Barzun has realized what kind of liberal individual it is that must embody the new University. The administrator will have been a student and a professor in his time, of course, but the challenge of the contemporary University is a challenge addressed to him *as administrator*.

Herein lie the origins of the idea of excellence that I discuss in the next chapter. It should be noted, though, that Barzun does not feel the need to have recourse to the notion of excellence and is able to recognize that excellence is a “shadow” (222); whereas Herbert I. London, writing an introduction to the reissue of Barzun’s text twenty-five years later, bemoans the fact that “excellence” is no longer as *real* as it was in Barzun’s day (222n), since there has been a “virtual abandonment of the much touted goal of excellence” (xxviii). Thus we can make the observation that Barzun appears as the John the Baptist of excellence, preparing the way for the new law (“excellence”) in the language of the old (“standards”), while London appears as St. Paul, telling us that the new law will be real only if it is as strictly applied as the Old. Things have speeded up since Christ’s day, since the elapsed time required for the re-postponement of messianic promise is now down from thirty-five to twenty-five years.

Yet in comparing Barzun with the contemporaries who invoke him, I want above all to remark upon a question of tone: the tone that differentiates Barzun’s work (and Pelikan’s) from the denunciations of



Allan Bloom or even of Herbert London in his 1993 reintroduction of Barzun's book. The remarkable difference is the loss of the mellifluous pomposity consequent upon entire self-satisfaction, and its replacement by vitriolic complaint. This is particularly clear with regard to the question of sexism. Throughout his text, Barzun refers to professors by the metonym "men." Let me take Barzun's description of the plight of the young graduate student as an example: "after the orals a dissertation has to be written—how and on what matters less than how quickly. For many topics Europe or other foreign parts are inescapable and disheartening!—Fulbright, children, wife working (or also a candidate), more library work, and in a foreign tongue—it is a nightmare" (228). Where Barzun remarks vaguely that women can indeed fulfill secretarial roles adequately in the University and perhaps even pursue graduate studies as a way of preparing themselves to bear the children of their male counterparts, Bloom and London see their University threatened by raving harpies.<sup>13</sup> Where Barzun sees silliness and calls it "preposterism," London sees "contamination" (xxviii). Despite the fact that books about the University marked by the enormous self-satisfaction of its (male) products are still being written (Pelikan is a case in point), it is clear that a significant shift has taken place. It is not that our times are more troubled; after all, Barzun pronounces himself untroubled by 1968. Rather, the problem that both Bloom and London labor under is that no one of us can seriously imagine him or herself as the hero of the story of the University, as the instantiation of the cultivated individual that the entire great machine works night and day to produce.

My own reluctance to assume the tone of self-satisfaction with which many of my predecessors presumably felt comfortable is not a matter of personal modesty. After all, I have not waited for the twilight of my career to write a book about the University. What counts, and what marks the tone of contemporary diatribes, is that the grand narrative of the University, centered on the production of a liberal, reasoning, subject, is no longer readily available to us. There is thus no point in my waiting. I am not going to become Jacques Barzun; the University system does not need such subjects any more. The liberal *individual* is no longer capable of metonymically embodying the *institution*. None of us can now seriously assume ourselves to be the centered subject of