

Reading an Academic Journal is Like Doing Ethnography

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Abstract: One view of doing ethnography is that it is like trying to construct a reading of a manuscript. What follows is a text which turns that definition around. Thus the proposition here is that "constructing a reading of a series of manuscripts—a journal—is like doing ethnography". The article itself is an ethnographic explication of the numerous texts contained in one edition of *Studies in Higher Education*. The aim is to provide an account of the texts therein in order to judge, from a Rortyan, pragmatist perspective, whether or not these stories are good for us.

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1. Introduction

An academic journal is a cultural artefact. It is made by an ever-changing community of scholars, by a dispersed academic tribe. The tribe's location is more virtual than actual. The community is represented by its journal, and it is through an ethnographic examination of the data within it that I intend to inquire into that academic culture. In a sense I am turning GEERTZ's definition of ethnography on its head. He wrote that "doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript" (GEERTZ, 1993a, p.10). What I propose is that "Constructing a reading of a series of manuscripts—a journal—is like doing ethnography". [1]

2. Background

This inquiry is curiosity-driven. I had just finished reading a PhD thesis where I had been struck by the author's reluctance to say who she was. For the most part, this individual author referred to herself as "we", occasionally as "one" and regularly as "it". Only on page 192 did she nearly become an "I" when she used the first person possessive pronoun "my". Is there a form of repression or withdrawal at work here where the author makes her writing as impersonal as possible in order to present her view of the world as an objective piece of research? Are such "author-vacant" texts thought to be more "academic" or "scientific" or "rigorous" than "author-saturated" texts? (see GEERTZ, 1988, p.8). [2]

This is hardly a new insight. However I was curious to follow up what I think is a peculiar way of producing, of writing, an academic text. As I was stuck in a hospital one day for over five hours with only the latest edition of *Studies in Higher Education* (Volume 28 Number 2 May 2003) to comfort me I used the time to begin an examination of the numerous texts collected therein. I adopted an ethnographic approach. [3]

3. An Ethnographic Approach

There are numerous ways of doing ethnography. There are various perspectives or paradigms provided by neo-positivists, interpretivists and critical theorists. My perspective is pragmatic and interpretivist in the RORTYan sense that I am mainly concerned with viewing a culture, albeit an academic culture, and one of its artefacts, in this case a journal, from the standpoint of one who wishes to see better democratic institutions as part of a better, even a utopian, society. I am aware that terms like "better" and "democratic" and "utopian" are irredeemably fuzzy (a very RORTYan term) but I shall press on. [4]

Many ethnographies are also written from a disciplinary perspective: educational, sociological, anthropological. I write from a somewhat eclectic educational background having started out as a humble teacher of English, having become interested in the philosophy of education, and having earned my living as a staff/educational developer in higher education. In more recent times I have begun to describe myself as a pragmatist (see BADLEY, 2001). [5]

Much of my understanding of ethnography comes from anthropologists such as Clifford GEERTZ and from educational ethnographers such as Martyn HAMMERSLEY. GEERTZ (1988, 1993a, 1993b, 2000) has been particularly influential in terms of ethnography as writing. He famously maintains that "ethnography is thick description" (GEERTZ, 1993a, pp.9-10). What would this mean in terms of a proposed ethnography of an academic journal? [6]

GEERTZ argues that ethnographic data are "thick" because "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (p.9). So ethnography is less observational than it is interpretative. Ethnographers explicate explications. They construct

constructions. Providing an ethnography of a journal—offering a thick description—is attempting to explicate what the journal's authors have already explicated in their texts. It is trying to find out what they have been up to. This also fits in with GEERTZ's view that cultural analysis, like literary criticism, is an interpretative activity in search of meaning: "It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical" (p.5). HAMMERSLEY, by contrast, appears to be "moving from an interpretative kind of ethnography towards a more traditional, if not neo-positivistic, kind of social science" (SMITH in HAMMERSLEY, 1990, p.7). I am more with GEERTZ than with HAMMERSLEY. [7]

4. Constructing a Reading of Studies in Higher Education (SHE)

This form of ethnography does not require an arduous trek into a remote, normally inaccessible, tribal territory. Fortunately the tribal artefact, the journal, comes directly to me, through the post, wrapped in its protective layer, a cocoon of see-through plastic. It initially, therefore, proclaims a kind of transparency and openness much to be desired. But what of its texts? Are they accessible and transparent too? [8]

4.1 Cover stories

The front cover, in glossy, classy, light tan, is the first text I read. Is this cover, this surface, enigmatical? How can I interpret it? Is it designed to impress? The journal's title—*Studies in Higher Education*—appears to be in font size 72, proclaiming itself, boldly, in shining white, innocent, unstained, and, of course, true. Does any other academic journal use such a flashy and massive and loud piece of emblazonry on its front cover? [9]

And yet "studies" is a rather quiet word suggesting something painstaking, something contemplative, involving careful attention to the pursuit of knowledge. Is there a mixed message here? An enigma? Is there perhaps a contradiction between the journal's initial shouting boldness and the wished for calmness of its tranquil ideas, its studies? Anyway, as GEERTZ (2000, p.13) puts it, "Call it a study if it pleases you, a pursuit, an inquiry". What we are promised are studies rather than research papers, which is also a bit odd given that the journal is published by the Society for Research in Higher Education. "Studies" obviously pleases them in the SRHE and the journal's editor—our tribal chief?—appears to go along with the more scholarly "studies" rather than the more hard-edged "research". But what's in a name? [10]

The back cover is a more modest affair. Its smaller print mainly shows the studies—stories—that are on offer in this edition. These are listed as an editorial, seven titles about some aspect of higher education, and six book reviews. No enigmas here apparently. Just titular indications of what the authors—narrators—have been up to and wish to tell us about. More about them follows below. [11]

The front inside cover is equally modest in its presentation but highly impressive in its content. Here the tribal elders are elegantly lined up and gently paraded for

our inspection and admiration. And admirable they most certainly are. The tribal chief leads the parade—Professor Malcolm TIGHT—followed by an editorial board of ten more eminent professors and two distinguished doctors. Becoming a tribal elder is obviously an arduous process for which you have to be not so much aged as highly qualified. No mere graduates or masters here. They profess at British universities or institutions, most of which would be described as "old" or even "elite". There are just three exceptions to this elitism and one of these, Professor Peter SCOTT, is a relatively recent transfer from "old" Leeds to "new" Kingston. Are these tribal elders fully representative of British higher education in all its colourful diversity? No Scottish, Welsh or Irish tribesmen or women appear to grace the tribal high table? Is this English exclusivity? And there are only three females amongst the thirteen elders. Sexual equality does not appear to be a feature or strength of this tribe. [12]

Yet there are other awesome elders for us to marvel at—a magnificent seven of international tribespeople. These come to the feast—virtually rather than actually—from Australia (two), Canada (two), USA (two) and Germany (one). Two of these are women—a better proportion than managed by the Brits. Nevertheless they are mainly Anglos with just one Saxon amongst them. And one of the US elders is from the World Bank, a major player in the globalization of our world? Does he represent a more dominant global culture than a supportive local culture? I only ask the question. [13]

What these local and global elders want, so it states in the inside front cover, is a journal that encourages two kinds of story teller: those who will illuminate learning and teaching through their particular disciplinary perspectives; and those teachers who will systematically reflect on their practice. So we have two categories of narrator—illuminators and reflectors, researchers and teachers—although the elders don't quite put it like that. That's how I read it. This is my construction. They are already ahead of the UK's recent White Paper (DfES 2003) which emphasizes the distinction between those who can do—the researchers, the illuminators—and those who can't—the teachers, the reflectors. The teachers can come to the party but the tales they tell must be systematically reflective. Do they merely reflect what the researchers illuminate? Is this all a bit patronizing perhaps? [14]

Proposed narratives are scrutinized—presumably by honorary elders called referees—for "an accessible, while rigorous, style which communicates to non-specialists". Well I think I'm a specialist in higher education and I might claim a special interest in philosophy but am I a non-specialist all told? I like writing to be accessible, which I take to mean "readable" and "understandable". Most academic writing, tale-telling, isn't: "the strictest, most formal expository prose I know is in academic journals, and writing there is notable for its deadness" (ELBOW, 1981, p.348). But things have probably improved since 1981. We shall see. [15]

I'm a bit worried by "rigorous" though. Here's a term which, if we are to believe another elder who wrote brilliantly and accessibly about academic tribes and their

territories, is especially used by physicists who "consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as better than the common crowd" (BECHER & TROWLER, 1989, p.57). Are we—the common crowd—to be constrained in our writing by scientific notions of "rigour", an espoused characteristic of those who think they are better than the rest of us? Are the studies in SHE meant to be rigorous before they are accessible, or accessible before they are rigorous? Can they be both? Do academics who aspire to rigour become, as ELBOW suggests, strict, formal, and dead? Richard RORTY warns us about writers—scientists particularly—who are "big on rigor": they are like the "careful and exacting quasi-transcendental logician teasing out preexistent relations among concepts—as if concepts were like bits of DNA molecules" (RORTY, 1998, p.338). Also the notion of rigour "seems to entail that there is something to be gotten right" (p.338). But for RORTY it is hard to separate the notion of rigour from that of a consensus of inquirers, of participants in an ongoing social practice. He also points out that "it is hard to be rigorous all by yourself, and equally hard to praise the same accomplishment both for originality and for rigor. When somebody does something for the first time, she may do it brilliantly, but she cannot do it rigorously" (p.339). Would the editor of the SHE or one of his tribal gatekeepers reject some brilliant, original work because it lacked rigour? [16]

4.2 The editorial story

The editorial is more than accessible. Its form is epistolary. Its style is warm, friendly and personal: "Hello again." The author, Malcom TIGHT, clearly identifies himself within the text: "my editorial", "I wrote about how I had been asked ...", "Well. I have made my selection now." There are more than forty "I"s or "my"s or "myself"s in less than two pages of text (TIGHT, 2003). Malcolm TIGHT is convincingly himself and he directly writes to us, his readers. He is clearly and accessibly, as GEERTZ would say, an "I-witness" for "to be a convincing "I-witness", one must, so it seems, first become a convincing "I" (GEERTZ, 1988, p.79). He provides us with a personable "I-text". [17]

Our tribal chief is a friendly, accessible narrator who involves us in his tale. But is he "big on rigor" in this epistle to the tribe? I think he tries to be. When he tells us how he set about editing a reader on higher education he offers us a number of scholarly citations which stand as examples of rigour. He rejects any charge that his approach was "too easy" (more rigour there) and claims that his criterion of inclusion was "quality" (that vague epitome of rigour). And yet he also appears to recoil from rigour by admitting that "subjective bias on my part was inevitable". Can one be rigorously subjective or subjectively rigorous? Is this a dilemma wrapped in an enigma? [18]

Rigour is apparent in the matrix he shares with us, a matrix which helpfully categorises key themes and methodologies in higher education. "Matrix" is, however, a wonderfully enigmatic term in itself since it combines something soft and womb-like with something hard and mathematical. "Matrix" sounds rigorous and scientific but is a metaphor derived from the accessible "mater" or "breeding female". And Malcolm TIGHT admits that he might have "privileged" some

methodological approaches and that, therefore, his categorisation, his matrix, could not be said to be "definitive". Our chief is not only personable but also honest and modest with it. At least he has invented a new literary form: a tribal epistle with academic references. (It is a miracle of rare device/A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice). Also his writing is far from the formal deadness criticised by Peter ELBOW. Instead it becomes what ELBOW calls "powerful conceptual writing" which is "usually more like talking than like mathematics or telegrams between angels" (ELBOW, 1981, p.353). This tribal elder sets a good example because he has "drifted into actually *speaking*" (p.353) to us as he writes, as he tells and talks his editorial tale. [19]

4.3 Tribal stories

The journal contains seven main studies or tribal stories. Three are British whilst four are international. But are they all rigorous and accessible? Is this "ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" a set of stories which are good for us or bad for us? (see INGLIS in SIKES, NIXON & CARR, 2003, p.131). [20]

4.3.1 Rigour and accessibility

First rigour. If the average number of references per study is anything to go by then these tribal stories are "big on rigor". The average number of references per article is 38, the smallest reference section contains 16 and the largest 81 references. Also many of the references are decidedly, rigorously, heavyweight: BARNETT, BECHER, BOUD, BOURDIEU, BUBER, CAMUS, GEERTZ, HEIDEGGER, KIERKEGAARD, LYOTARD, NIETZSCHE, SARTRE, SCOTT, TROW, and UNAMUNO. Tribal elders BARNETT, BOUD and SCOTT are included. Plenty of academic roughage here. [21]

Rigour is also evident in the style of some of these studies. You can usually tell you are in for a rigorous time when a paper or abstract begins with "it is argued that ..." rather than, say, "I argue that ..." WILLMOTT's opening paper eschews the personal throughout. This leads to the occasional stylistic oddity. For example WILLMOTT begins a paragraph as follows: "Before examining the nature and development of the assessment exercises and the emergent role of peer review within them, these exercises are located in the period immediately preceding their introduction." (WILLMOTT, 2003, p.131) [22]

Here, in order to avoid the personal, that it is WILLMOTT himself who is about to do the examining, WILLMOTT misrelates the participle "examining" with the noun phrase "these exercises" which is presumably not what he intended. [23]

SILVER's tale, "Does a university have a culture?", is again mainly impersonal in style. However a stray "we" does creep into the text (SILVER, 2003, p.159). [24]

CURZON-HOBSON's narrative, "Higher learning and the critical stance", is also of the "it is argued ..." tendency but here a single "I" slips onto the page right at the beginning (CURZON-HOBSON, 2003, p.201), giving us hope for an

accessibility that is never realized. This is the least transparent of all the texts in the journal, contains many of the heavyweight citations, rejects attempts to objectify the world, but virtually attempts to objectify the author himself by his failure to be an "I" (except once) and by becoming instead an "it". Rigorous, yes, too much. Accessible, hardly. [25]

LUEDDEKE's account of "Professionalising teaching practice in higher education" is also "big on rigor". This twelve-page article contains one figure, four tables and eighty-one references. Even the acknowledgement at the end of the tale is wonderfully abstract: "appreciation is extended to ..." (LUEDDEKE, 2003, p.225). [26]

These four authors, tribal storytellers, seem to deny their individuality by adopting an impersonal, would be objective and undoubtedly rigorous style of presentation. However what they gain in rigour they lose in accessibility. There are no friendly "I-witnesses" here in these "author-vacant" texts, these "it-texts". [27]

Interestingly the three papers which are double-authored, academic double-acts, have no such problem with adopting personal and reasonably accessible styles. It is as if their very plurality as tellers licenses them to become overt people—"we"—rather than covert, impersonal, authors. De WIT and VERHOEVEN use the "we" form some thirty-five times in their twelve-page article. MURTONEN and LEHTINEN use "we" and "our" over forty times, and LEE and BOUD some forty-five times. Being couples seems to release these authors from the shackles of the "it is argued ..." approach. Coupling allows them to become, convincingly, authentically, themselves, to admit that though they are academics undertaking important and rigorous research they are also human beings capable of referring to themselves reflexively. They are "We-witnesses". We readers and listeners should be grateful for their accessibility, for their "author-saturated" texts, for their "we-texts". [28]

4.3.2 Good stories and bad stories

However the main issue for me is not so much how these academic tales are presented—"I-texts" or "we-texts" or "it-texts"; rather it is whether this "ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" contains stories which are good for us or are bad for us. "Good", of course, is another fuzzy word. RORTY, particularly, admits to the fuzziness of his response when he defines "good" in terms of producing more "variety and freedom" and/or more "growth" and/or "unimaginably better" democratic institutions with less cruelty and more social justice. This, he maintains, is at least "a principled and deliberate fuzziness" (see RORTY, 1999, p.27-30). I shall use this attempt to define "good" as my set of criteria to judge whether these academic stories are good or bad for us. [29]

WILLMOTT, I think, offers us a good story in that he critiques the way in which successive research assessment exercises (RAEs) in the UK have made university research more responsive to commercial and political agendas (WILLMOTT, 2003, p.129). He particularly argues against "the progressive tightening of the coupling between research activity and the "needs of industry"

and the way in which peer review has been used "to legitimise" the process (p.130). Overall he maintains that the RAEs have so increased and legitimised the dependence of research on commercial funding to such an extent that they actually pose a threat to research excellence (p.131). As a result researchers report that their agendas are increasingly defined by "others" which is an indication, I think, that their academic freedom is being compromised by research having become more and more a "contract culture" (p.139). WILLMOTT does not explicitly see all this as an issue of academic freedom but there surely could be no other interpretation in his reference to "the subversion and *colonisation* of research agendas by commercially driven initiatives" (p.139, my italics). The RAEs have, he concludes, become a "potent mechanism for justifying the withdrawal of public research funding from an increasing proportion of academics and departments" (p.139) so, instead of more academic freedom and more academic *growth*, the UK's research activities are threatened with "dilution and distortion" (p.140). The RAEs contribute to "the self-interested preservation of the elite institutions and departments from which most RAE panel members are drawn" (so not much *democracy* and *social justice* there) and risk "a progressive disenchantment of, and with, academic life that renders research within universities a less attractive career option" (p.140). WILLMOTT, writing from within an elite location—Cambridge—nevertheless reveals himself as a democratic good guy (a RORTYan accolade) by telling us a powerful cautionary tale of the "perverse outcome" of a process "ostensibly designed to enhance rather than degrade research activity" (p.140). This is, therefore, for me, a very good story about a very bad state of academic affairs. [30]

The account given by De WIT and VERHOEVEN of divisions in the higher education system in Flanders appears to be another good story about a poor set of conditions. Here the authors describe differences between the old universities, offering theoretical training based on scientific research, and the new post-war colleges which are mainly vocationally oriented (De WIT & VERHOEVEN, 2003, p.143). Although there has been an "academic drift" of colleges and a "vocational drift" of universities, with the two processes appearing to bring the two sets of institutions closer together, their study shows that "a binary divide is still present in Flanders" (p.144). Indeed their comparison of informatics courses in the two sets of institutions shows that both the educational content of the courses and the expectations of their students differ considerably. University students "expect to gain in responsibility and move up to leadership functions" whereas college students "view themselves as readily employable but without much opportunity to climb the occupational hierarchy" (p.144). College students appear to be drawn mainly from "financially weaker families and families with a lower educational level and occupation status" and are "more extrinsically motivated and practice oriented" (p.155). By contrast "the well-off kept enrolling in university" (ibid). Their conclusion that "the major dividing line" between college and university "has not withered away" (p.155) is, therefore, for me, a criticism of yet another state's failure to provide *equality of opportunity* for students from all socio-economic and educational levels. These authors tell a tale of lowering expectations, a process whereby students from lower socio-economic groups are virtually seduced into vocationally-oriented courses on the assumption that these will help them enter

the labour market more quickly than those who follow academic university courses. Their prospects for *growth* as leaders are thereby reduced. This is hardly acceptable on *democratic* grounds. [31]

I find Harold SILVER's paper somewhat puzzling, even enigmatic. He provides a more than useful, indeed illuminating, analysis of university culture following a GEERTZian approach which is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (GEERTZ, 1993, p.5 quoted in SILVER, 2003, p.157). He seems to agree that universities are becoming increasingly "managerial", "centralised", "market oriented" and "commercialised" but, nevertheless, argues that it is not feasible to regard the university as a "unitary entity". This is mainly because of complexities in academic life resulting from divided loyalties, first, to the subject and the academic profession internationally and, then, to the institution itself. The outcome is "rival or conflicting values and allegiances" (p.158). He quotes BARNETT in support of this view that universities are "a conglomerate of knowledge factions, interests and activities" rather than a "unitary entity" (p.159). His interviewees seemed unable to identify the culture of their university except for those who interpreted it as "a culture of research" although there was frequent evidence for "a culture of tension or conflict" (p.161). Interestingly, "no interviewee used the concept of a 'culture of teaching'" (p.161). Overall SILVER sees the university as lacking any culture based on a community of interest, shared norms, assumptions and values (p.162). In the UK, the university's cultural coherence has been undermined by information technology, globalisation and the funding policies of the state (p.166) so that "individual perceptions of the university are ones of chaos or anarchy or of a system of subcultures in perpetual, erratic and damaging tensions" (p.167). However, having given this rather gloomy account of the culture-less university, SILVER puzzles and disappoints by not providing us with any *hope* for the future. Here he is unlike BARNETT who, having similarly analysed the university as almost wrecked by those ideologists who would "condemn it to narrow, intolerant and factional interests", suggests several levers of change and improvement. These include ideals such as *cheerfulness*, *tolerance*, *reasonableness*, *generosity* and a *will* to go on (BARNETT, 2003, p.180). (I have suggested elsewhere that BARNETT's ideals are not that much different from RORTY's fuzzy pragmatist principles—see BADLEY, 2004). SILVER's story about the university is despondent. BARNETT, at least, offers us a start towards recovery, even towards creating something better. BARNETT tells a good story; SILVER a sad, if not exactly a bad, one. [32]

In their tale of how many students "dread" research methodology and statistics courses MURTONEN and LEHTINEN mercifully provide us with some suggestions for action and improvement. Theirs, therefore, is a story of a bad problem with, potentially, a good outcome. As they are attempting to help students develop intellectually, they can be judged to be promoting *growth*, which is one of my pragmatist criteria of goodness. Their study shows that students struggle with research methodology because of superficial teaching, difficulties in linking theory and practice, the concepts and content involved, understanding scientific research as a whole, and the students' own negative attitudes

(MURTONEN & LEHTINEN, 2003, p.182). Their suggestions for improvement include: helping students develop a "deep and holistic understanding of research as an integrated whole"; help understand student anxieties by researching them more; connect theory and research by using and involving students in real-life research situations; and by clarifying the central procedures and concepts of research methodology more thoroughly (p.183). Overall, then, this is a relatively straightforward attempt to remedy a poor pedagogical situation by suggesting improvements in practice. It is a story about promoting student *growth*. Whether their suggestions work in practice is another story entirely. [33]

LEE and BOUD, in their stimulating account of writing groups and academic identity, also identify a serious problem and then describe what appears to be a fruitful solution. This is also, therefore, a promotion of *cultural change* and *growth* but, this time, for academics rather than for students. Theirs is a story which shows that "a culture of laissez-faire collegiality" is inadequate for helping "higher education workers" to develop the capacities and practices of academic work, especially where that work requires research and writing skills (see LEE & BOUD 2003, p.187). Their solution was to set up writing groups in their university in order, first, to focus on "the central role of writing in the research process" and, second, to conceptualise academic development as a "local practice" where academic identities are "forged, rehearsed and remade" (p.188). Indeed, because they identified scholarly writing as "a key site for the generation of fear and anxiety, as well as desire, in a significant number of academics", the creation of writing groups as supportive peer environments might not just be regarded as useful or desirable but as necessary (p.190). Their claim is that "writing groups can function to demystify the process of scholarly writing and publication, to build skills of review and critique, to provide early audiences for draft texts, and so on" (p.190). They also offer, generously, a set of three principles for successful development in other local sites of practice. These are, first, "mutuality", a term they use to disrupt the effects of excessive academic autonomy and which is achieved through the creation of "a rich peer relationship". This "mutuality" or "peer-reciprocation" may even displace those old laissez-faire notions of collegiality (p.194). The second principle is "that successful research development must become *normal business*" (p.195). Here the emphasis is on seeing research and writing as part of the daily life of the workplace with a focus on "know-how": "using conferences strategically, identification and analysis of key journals and the practice of submission, positioning in relation to "rejection" letters and the sharing of time management strategies" (p.195). Thirdly, there is their attention to "*identity and desire*" in research development where *desire* is seen as a positive and productive force for change which then make new forms of *identity* possible (p.197). Overall these writing groups were evaluated as having clearly worked to reposition participants as active scholarly writers within a peer-learning framework, to build mutuality and to break down boundaries between specialisms (p.198). Their story is altogether a good one which could help other academics in other local sites *grow* as scholars and writers. [34]

Whereas MURTONEN and LEHTINEN promote *student growth*, and LEE and BOUD help develop *academic growth*, Aidan CURZON-HOBSON's tale may be

interpreted as being about *student growth*, *academic growth* and *institutional growth*. His central concern is to develop and defend "a concept of the critical stance" as "a goal of higher education" (CURZON-HOBSON, 2003, p.201). He wants to challenge students, teachers and universities to "proclaim an education beyond the technician and the competent" and to remind universities that they should be concerned about "the educated, critical and reflective person" (p.201). His notion of the critical stance is that it is an attitude that fashions our contact both with knowledge and with others. It is "an enquiring and reflexive disposition towards knowledge, the self and others" and is underpinned particularly by a recognition of our *freedom* to choose as well as our consequent need to act responsibly (p.202, my italics). Further, adopting a critical stance means that we must accept that our view of the world is necessarily incomplete and that certain knowledge is unattainable (p.202). Numerous luminaries—BUBER, CAMUS, FREIRE, SARTRE—are quoted to support his view of higher learning as a "critical, creative process" of dialogue through which our understanding is tested and remade (p.204). The critical stance is "an enquiring, sceptical attitude" which should prevent us from uncritically accepting the ideas of others (p.205). Learning through dialogue is characterised by curiosity, openness, a balance between freedom and authority, and a linking of theory and practice (p.207). Further, the challenge of the critical stance is not that students should reject all they are taught but rather that they and their teachers should exercise their *freedom*, responsibly, to change what is possible, presumably for the better of themselves and the society they live in (p.210). The pedagogy of the critical stance requires teachers to show their students that their own understandings are "fragile and incomplete", and also that they will listen to their students' "unique interpretations and stories" in order to "provide the critical and caring conditions necessary for the *growth* of all" (p.211, my italics). CURZON-HOBSON's own story, therefore, certainly meets my criteria for promoting *freedom* and *growth*—in this case in students, teachers, universities and, presumably, in society as a whole. It is, I think, a story which is good for us even if it is a hard one, at times, to follow. [35]

George LUEDDEKE's study of "Professionalising Teaching Practice" is also a story promoting *growth*. He argues for developing academics as both scholars of teaching and as scholarly teachers. Such teachers would then be able to prepare their students for the unstable, uncertain, unpredictable, challengeable and contested world so powerfully analysed by BARNETT (2000). Thus *growth* of teachers as teachers should also promote *growth* of students as individuals capable of coping with BARNETT's world of "supercomplexity". His central thesis is that the current teaching model is inadequate for this purpose. He maintains that teachers should make inquiry-based learning the standard in higher education so that students become involved in research activity and take a key role in creating the research/learning link (LUEDDEKE, 2003, p.223). This is a not dissimilar approach to one I propose in a recent article (BADLEY, 2002). Overall, LUEDDEKE suggests that the scholarship of teaching could be enhanced (or *grown* as I might put it) by way of three general strategies: developing students through scholarly curricula and teaching; developing staff by "*growing* informed networks" or communities of practice; and by developing organisations through team leadership (LUEDDEKE, 2003, pp.223-224, my italics). All of this is seen to

be part of "the slow process of changing the professionals" and of upgrading their skills (p.225). It confirms for me that LUEDDEKE is yet another in this edition of the journal who offers us a good story of professional *growth* and development. [36]

Most of the academic tales presented in this edition of SHE are stories which I would interpret as *good for us*. They promote, variously and hopefully, student *growth*, staff *growth* and institutional *growth*. Only Harold SILVER's critique of the modern university comes across as a rather pessimistic account of where universities currently are. He fails to come up with prospects for improvement and change and *growth* so evident in, for example, BARNETT's (2003) latest insightful analysis. [37]

4.4 Stories about stories

The book review section of each academic journal is a set of stories about stories, constructions about constructions, explications about explications. Reviewers tell us what they think each book's author has been up to. Each reviewer offers us a set of "thick" data interpreting each text as they have read it and seen it. [38]

I don't have the space here to write a story about each of the reviews (stories about stories) in this edition of SHE. Instead I shall use a happy coincidence to provide a comparative ethnographic account of the first review in the section. It so happens that I had already written my own review of the first book examined—*Academics and the Real World* by Gillian EVANS—when I came to read this story of a story by Jeroen HUISMAN. Ethnographically speaking, we had both visited the same territory, the book, formed our interpretations of what the author, Gillian EVANS, was up to and then written our ethnographic reports of what we had found there. As ethnographers we were both obviously trying to get others to take seriously what we had written as a result of having penetrated another form of life—the book—"of having, one way or another, truly "been there"" (see GEERTZ, 1988, pp.4-5). [39]

What HUISMAN saw when he was there is a little different from what I saw. But then, as William BLAKE once put it, "as a man is, so he sees". HUISMAN is not me and I am not him. HUISMAN is highly critical of the story Gillian EVANS tells. He is annoyed by what he sees as her negative one-sided views, bored by her lack of new insights, unimpressed by her numerous references to Greek philosophers, contests the general conclusion that the university has gone down the drain, and turns down her suggestions for improvement (HUISMAN, 2003, p.229). To him her book fails as a critical attempt to open up a debate on the social role of the university. It presents a distorted picture, only mentions the downside of the current situation, hardly offers any facts, refers mainly to dead authors, and "fails to put *her story* in the perspective of present-day debates on higher education" (p.230, my italics). He concludes that "this is a book for believers, and those adhering to this religion will view the book as a sermon. Non-believers are advised to pass the church, for discussions with the clergy are pointless" (p.230). [40]

At least, here, HUISMAN recognises that EVANS is presenting us with a *story*, her own account, as a Cambridge medieval historian and theologian, of how she sees the academic world. She offers us a specific perspective. As she is, so she sees. And, as the novelist Margaret ATWOOD has recently reminded us, "Reality is seen through a lens, and the lens *distorts*" (ATWOOD, 2002, p.106, my italics). Therefore, we would be naïve to accept her story at face value. Who in academic life would accept, let alone read, "a book for believers?" [41]

My journey into the book was much more enjoyable than HUISMAN's. That is not to say that I am a total believer in what EVANS has to say. But her tale about academics and the real world, about what she has been up to, produced a certain *frisson* of excitement. I didn't find her critical stance annoying, or boring, or unimpressive. I agree that much of it rests on ideas from "dead authors" but then what would one expect from a historian and a theologian? Her main thesis is that the university should be seen as embodying an idea which values disinterested thought, analysis, inquiry and discovery wherever they may lead and whether they produce socially useful outcomes or not. Her main concern is that public and commercial interests—"the real world"—are invading and diminishing universities as important *free speech* environments (see BADLEY, 2003). She is particularly concerned by the demand that universities should foster the entrepreneurial spirit and that research results may be suppressed because they fail to please commercial funders. She wants to reassert the principle of academic *freedom* in the university's dealings with the real world. Her goals are clear—her study is an attempt to describe and analyse a serious confrontation between academic *freedom* and truth and real world power. [42]

I would criticise EVANS's preparation for this task. One might have expected references to writers such as BARNETT, BECHER, KOGAN, SCOTT and WILLIAMS, all of whom have a lot to say about the relationship between the modern university and society. Not one is quoted in passing. Instead we get the ancient Greeks and the occasional (almost) modern—Henry JAMES, Thomas KUHN, and F.R. LEAVIS. There is some recent material from press articles and parliamentary reports. None of this is uninteresting but it appears more quixotic than directly relevant to contemporary academics and the real world. [43]

Her method is to use this ancient and (some) modern material to show that there has always been tension between those who would assert their freedom to pursue the truth and those powerful enough to constrain them. She wants the university, quoting DERRIDA, to be a place of cerebral fun—"the only place within society where play is possible to such an extent ... (where) this measure, this proportion, of *freedom* is precious, because it's the place where we can try and think what the university is" (EVANS, 2002, p.7, my italics). I doubt if BARNETT, for example, would dissent from such a sentiment although HUISMAN would probably see it as one-sided sermonizing. Her view that the real world—big government, big business and big science—is now dominating the academy would not be out of place in WILLMOTT's article in this edition of SHE. She even questions whether some leading academic journals may be "in the pay" of commercial sponsors, but of course this would not apply to SHE. [44]

Much of this may sound a little paranoiac. It may read more like a diatribe than a disinterested analysis. She complains that the real world is creating a fearful, creeping, apologetic, resentful and impoverished academic world (p.107). She pleads instead for "true universities" to be run more openly with academic staff as "members" and "owners" of each institution and "custodians" of its purposes, fully involved in collegial policy- and decision-making. Otherwise universities cannot do their necessary job in society as social critics (pp.136-137). Despite HUISMAN's objections I read EVANS's book as a good story, oddly told, which promotes some of the principles I endorsed at the beginning of this journey—academic *growth, freedom and democracy*. [45]

5. Envoi

I have suggested that reading an academic journal could be seen as doing ethnography. Also I stated that my view of ethnography is more interpretative than observational or scientific. I have read the journal's texts in my own way and interpreted them from a particular, mainly pragmatist, perspective. So what have I learned from this brief ethnographic study of the SHE-ite academic tribe? First, I learned that some tellers of tales seem reluctant to produce what I have called "I-texts", presumably on the grounds that "it-texts" sound just that bit more academic and objective and rigorous. Second, that this reluctance seems to be reduced when authors double up, their being couples apparently loosening the shackles of academic convention. Third, much that I have read here has supported my own concerns to promote a more democratic conception of higher education. Much of the content of the journal has focused on issues of student or academic or institutional *growth*. And for me, "growth is indeed the only end that democratic higher education can serve" (RORTY, 1999, p.125). Academic *freedom*, especially to teach and research away from too direct a set of economic and governmental pressures, has also been a strong feature. Here again, I agree with RORTY's view that "if you take care of political, economic, cultural and academic freedom, then truth will take care of itself" (p.117). Fourth, the SHE-ite tribe in particular and the university in general lacks an organisational culture if SILVER's pessimistic tale is to be believed. [46]

However, as GEERTZ argues, "ethnographers need to convince us ... not merely that they themselves have truly "been there", but ... that had we been there we should have seen what they saw, felt what they felt, concluded what they concluded" (GEERTZ, 1988, p.16). As my bit of comparative ethnography shows this is hard, if not impossible, to achieve. Just as HUISMAN and I disagree in our interpretations of EVANS's quirky book on *Academics and the Real World* so, I imagine, would other readers of this edition of *Studies in Higher Education*—other ethnographers—provide contrasting views of what the journal's authors have been up to. I claim that I have "been there" and that I have constructed my own, perhaps idiosyncratic, reading of a set of manuscripts. Whether my reading is rigorous enough or accessible enough or makes a story which is good for us as academics is a matter I shall leave others to judge. [47]

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