Feeling Academic

Jeffrey J. Williams

No doubt everyone reading this can attest to a sense of well-being about his or her job, the healthy and generous ways that his or her colleagues act, and the fair and rational ways that the profession operates. However—and this may shock you—academe is often known as a snakepit, in Henry Kissinger's famous quip a scene of vicious battles over petty stakes, and it seems a law of academic life that departments are dysfunctional and professors neurotic, with a store of ready complaints, foibles, and affectations.

For instance, one might be in the kind of department where animosity lends an acrid tinge to the hallway air and, like the Crips...
and the Bloods, some groups refuse to be in the same room with others, not to mention sit on the same committee, and where the battles are fought over the bodies of pre-tenured assistant professors, the footsoldiers who are always the first casualties of any skirmish. Or one might be in a department that has worked out an extended truce, where faculty extol collegiality and genially compare notes about their lawn mowers or oil burners or the virtues of Paxil versus Effexor, but knit their brows when someone mentions the MLA convention or is loutish enough to voice a dissenting view, because it threatens to disturb the calm and throw the department back to the mythic bad days. Or one might work in a department that thinks of itself as a family, with the distant father, the doting mother, the dutiful daughter, the rambunctious nephew, the naughty son who is put in time-out until he makes his way back into the fold—a family that embraces you but also makes you want to go away to boarding school. And one might tell one’s partner—or if he or she tires of hearing about it, one’s therapist, or if she tires of hearing about it, one’s cat—about the irritation one feels about a pompous colleague, the anxiety about a book, the disgruntlement with only two lukewarm reviews of a book that took eight years to write, the jealousy at the footloose colleague who gets a job offer with a thirty thousand dollar raise, the fear of the senior colleague who frowns every time you walk by. There are also, of course, many positive moments that induce us to carry on (or, unless confirmed masochists, we most likely would not carry on), like the gratification of a class when the discussion seems to crackle like fission, the pleasure of reading a book or article that surprises you, the thrill of a conference talk to a packed room and no one sleeping, the satisfaction of putting a manuscript in the mail, the pride of seeing your name in print, the hope of a new idea.

Do I exaggerate? Perhaps, but who does not recognize these affects, behaviors, and modes of feeling that tone our experience? Which raises the question: how do we make sense of this dimension of academic life? In short, we don’t. We usually dismiss it as peripheral, as external and exogenous, in the immortal words of
Barry Manilow, as "Nothing more than feelings." What if instead we were to see these feelings as central rather than peripheral to our experience, as indigenous rather than foreign, or at least as significant and serious?

In my observation, the experience of being an academic is permeated with and in fact distinguished by particular kinds of feeling. You might reasonably respond that everyone has feelings, but they are accidental and irrelevant to our work. They are irrational and of the fickle heart, whereas we work in the rational realm of the mind. However, on a broad theoretical plane, the neurologist Antonio Damasio argues that a separation of heart and head or feeling and mind is "Descartes' error," and in fact feeling is inseparable from and entwined with reason. To prove this, he adduces case studies of patients who have lost certain brain functions, and finds that particular emotions correlate with particular cognitive abilities. For Damasio, feelings don't get in the way of thinking; they are the way of thinking.

More specifically, there is a vein of feeling or a "mentality," in C. Wright Mills' phrase, that is distinctive to academe, especially to those of us in the humanities. Many of the protocols of our profession purport formal criteria and goals, presumably measured in rational, and progressively moreso in the era of accounting, quantifiable ways. But those protocols also register, like a clicking geiger counter, distinctive if not peculiar nodes of feeling. Take tenure, for example. Tenure very technically is a structural protocol to guarantee due process in the event of firing (contrary to myth, it is not a guarantee of lifetime employment). In fact, tenure is similar to the kind of job protocol that most civil service workers, like postal workers or public librarians or police, have, who effectively have lifetime tenure after a brief probationary period (usually one or two years rather than the seven year purgatory we have), or that unionized workers have, who cannot be fired without cause. In actual practice, except at the rarefied elevations of Ivies and other hyper-elite schools, most people attain tenure. And the criteria for tenure are not arbitrary but standardized and quantifiable, usually noted in departmental bylaws, in most research-oriented universi-
ties a book from an academic press, in some comprehensive, regional universities five or so articles.²

However, there is no word nor protocol more fraught with feeling in academic life than tenure. Like the threat of electroshock to rats in a maze, it seems to loom in the psyches of junior professors, inducing hope, fear, abjection, hubris, irritation, ambivalence, diffidence, pride, and guilt. And, tellingly, it does not end after one attains it, as it might for a civil service worker who has done her job and gotten through the one year mark without screwing up, but pulses through the feeling and demeanor of tenured professors, who, on reappointment committees, in reports and evaluations, and in informal interchange, keep their hands on the switches even if they don't administer the jolt. The process might induce generosity and sympathy in them, extending support to those with less power, or it might induce sternness and talk of "standards," even if they never themselves acceded to those standards. Tenure structures, more than any other protocol, the affective economies of the workplaces we call departments; it expresses the mutual affective investment of those therein.

An element of the investment in tenure derives not only from its intraprofessional power, of those within a department, but from its extraprofessional provenance. Tenure serves to distinguish us precisely from plebeians like civil service workers, and I would go so far as to say that our charged defenses of tenure are often fueled not by the threat to academic freedom but by the threat to our class distinction. That goes some way to explaining, I think, the fraught embrace of unions within academic precincts. When people complain about graduate students being represented by food service unions, it makes no objective sense: unions are organizational bodies that might represent a wide band of workers under their umbrellas; just as companies like GE no longer just make light bulbs, unions no longer represent one trade under the auspices of which they were founded, but a diversified range of workers. It makes affective sense, though, because something as lowly, on the class scale we all know and recognize, as a food service union would besmirch the status that we presumably have, and often
jealously guard. Status, after all, is the one thing that professions customarily offer; state troopers, in statistics marshalled by Marc Bousquet, earn roughly the same as humanities professors, if not more. In terms of economic rational choice theory that most economists hold as sacrosanct, to become a trooper presents a choice no different from becoming a professor (actually, given the state of academic jobs, maybe a more rational choice); however, I doubt many of us would readily choose to don a trooper’s uniform.

One reason why it matters to talk about feeling is because it is a fundamental part of identity formation; affects or feelings define our identities as academics, for those in English departments more specifically as academic humanists and for readers of *JAC* perhaps even more particularly as compositionists. We generally think of identity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, abledness, or class, which no doubt generate certain feelings. But those categories seem to have a material reference, tied to the body, even if not essential. An identity defined by being an academic is slightly different. It might be a result of our class fraction, but probably a better way to think of it is that professions constitute their own subcultures, so identity derives from our subculture, just as those in the punk scene or lawyers might have their distinctive subcultures.³

Another reason why it matters to talk about academic feeling is because most historical and sociological work on professionalization focuses on the organizations, structures, and protocols that we pass through to attain credentials and professional standing. The theory tends to view professions as formal structures like the DMV, where you get the Driver’s Manual, take your written exam and road test, and finally are awarded your license. But I would hold that affects or feelings are a primary medium of professionalization—part of its informal structure—and the affects and modes of behavior that one learns, notably in grad school, tangibly make us into academics. They are part of what Pierre Bourdieu called “the system of dispositions” of the habitus within which we work; they habituate us to the profession. It is not
through reading books alone that you become an academic; you 
learn to feel and behave like an academic to become an academic. 
Academic feelings are what hail us into academe; they cause us to 
be recognized as academics and to recognize ourselves as 
such.

In a series of essays, I have looked at a number of the nodes 
of feeling of our profession, clustered around keywords such as 
"the life of the mind," "star," "our work," and "smart," and some of 
the affects, such as the gratification of recognition and the disdain 
for teaching, that they indicate. These keywords officially advert to 
objective properties, for instance when a reader's report deems an 
article to add to knowledge, but unofficially they also designate 
affective criteria, for instance when a report declares an article to 
be "smart." The feelings we have about why we do what we do— 
practicing the life of the mind, for instance—construct us as 
professionals and encourage us to act in certain ways. While affect 
has been on the front burner of criticism for the past few years, and 
it has become an obvious truth that identity is not essential but 
constructed and performed, we rarely talk about the construction 
and performance of our own academic identities and the feelings 
etwined with them. Or rather, we talk about those feelings aplenty, 
but in the hallway, at the bar, or on the telephone, not in theory. I 
would like to make more sense of this underground water table of 
our profession.

Which brings me to Chris Gallagher's essay "We 
Compositionists: Toward Engaged Professionalism," that appeared 
recently in JAC. Gallagher's goal is to institute a more public 
component of our work, through what is usually called "outreach," 
making connections with programs, for instance, in local K-12s. 
His point is that it should not just be occasional outreach or invisible 
service but an integral part of what we do. This is not an entirely 
surprising goal, but where Gallagher's argument has more teeth is 
in answering recent debates in composition studies. One debate 
centers on the critique of composition as given over to "managerial 
professionalism"; he steers a middle course between accommoda-

(continues on next page)
and what he perceives as the extremism and arrogance of the rejection of the WPA by Bousquet, in a notorious and award-winning essay in *JAC*, and others. Another debate is a tendency of composition discourse toward focusing on its status as a discipline; he finds this misdirected and that a better solution is to focus on its bearing as a profession. Although he doesn't explain it quite in the way I am, conceiving composition in professional terms allows him its reach outside the presumably more narrow confines of academe and its disciplines. He closes with a set of proposals for building such public bridges.

This seems like generally good advice. We might disagree about some of Gallagher's suggestions, and I can imagine, with some dread, endless committee meetings figuring out which work should be supported and how to measure this kind of public work, but the imperative to make such a public connection is a good idea, as is the imperative to value service more. I find Gallagher strongest, though, not in his prescription for engaged professionalism—I doubt many people would advocate a disengaged professionalism, and, since our primary function is teaching, it seems to me that one might simply stick to that task to be engaged—but in his suggestions, and in fact would like more account of how he himself does things like work with Nebraska schools (which, according to his bio on the Nebraska webpage, he has done a good bit of). There is a tendency in English to make theoretical arguments to assert our prescriptions, but I think we need more accounts of how people actually accomplish, or fail to accomplish, pedagogical or service tasks. This is not to dispense with theory (do please keep assigning the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*), but we do not lack for conceptual finesse and modification, which often become their own justification and self-satisfying performance. Thinking for its own sake is one goal that the university protects, but, given the state of the university, academic labor, and student experience, what we need most now are ideas we can use.

The hook for me in Gallagher's essay, though, is not its discrimination of discipline and profession nor its proposals, but its
broaching the subterranean stream of affect. Gallagher begins with a set of responses from graduate students:

Compositionists are operatives in some secret, vaguely leftish political movement.

Compositionists talk mainly to each other mostly about themselves.

Compositionists are by turns self-congratulatory, self-pitying, and self-loathing.

Compositionists like to complain . . . a lot. (75)

Gallagher, with bemused humor, encapsulates a scene of professional formation. What I find striking is that formation depends not on the official realm of methods or scholarship but on feeling and affect. Gallagher's students, who take the role of naive observers on the threshold of the profession, lay bare some strands of academic feeling: self-righteousness, arrogance, the desire to have public provenance, disgruntlement, defensiveness about not having much public provenance, autonomy and self-interest, and of course pride, pity and loathing.

Gallagher, rightly in my view, roots these feelings as part of the anxiety of the professional middle class that Barbara Ehrenreich analyzes in her book *Fear of Falling*. There she explains how the structural conditions of this latter-day invention of a professional middle-class generate a structure of feeling, or what she calls in her subtitle "the inner life of the professional middle class." Because one attains class status through the symbolic capital of education and credentials rather than material wealth and capital control, so there is an inherent anxiety or insecurity about that immaterial base. (As we know, a diploma with a PhD on it will not necessarily grant you decent gainful employment.) I myself often refer to the perplex that Ehrenreich unfolds, for instance in the way that tenure literalizes the fear of falling. But to say that we are members of the middle class is a very broad claim—helpful in dispelling the sense
that we are classless, but without explaining the distinctions specific to those of us in academe, in the humanities, in English, and in composition. There are a number of elements that demarcate our class fraction (that no doubt deserve more time to unfold): the residual artistocratic structure of feeling of high cultural pursuits like literature, that accords us high status without the cash; the anticapitalist bearing of the adept amateur, who seeks culture over cash; a residual bearing as an autonomous craft guild; the research protocol that provides a rule of internal differentiation in academe, between "researchers" and those who do the devalued work of teaching. These generate some of the specific coordinates of what it means to be an academic humanist.

I think a better way to describe this scene of professional formation, and the affects that define it, is as a subculture rather than a profession or discipline. In other words, the way to understand our profession is through style, in Dick Hebdige's usage. Style, of course, does not just refer to clothing, although that might not be irrelevant, but to the mutual codes, bearing, and expression of a particular group, codes of recognition of who is a member of the group and who is not. Gallagher himself displays one style of the compositionist: of the conscientious, well-meaning, and balanced rhetorician.

Like most critics, Gallagher brings up this realm of affect to leave it behind. His vignette, other than as a humorous rhetorical entrance, is to make the more serious point that our tacit description of composition is misunderstood by the public—grad students stand in for a public response, since they are informed but outside, still in the process of being brought in. The implication is that the public misunderstanding is our own fault, stemming from our own misrepresentation of composition as a discipline. We should be more engaged, the result of which would be that the public would have a better idea of what we do and presumably then appreciate it more.

One place where class comes up, and one of the few places where one can find a discussion of the affective dimension of academic life, is Stanley Fish's funny, perceptive, contrarian, and
finally mean-spirited essay, “The Unbearable Ugliness of Volvos.” Fish's basic argument is that academics are masochists who deny themselves normal pleasures and satisfactions. They do so because they can then claim a superior moral bearing. Fish's chief example is that academics stereotypically drive Volvos. He surmises that, as salaries rose through the late 1960s and 70s, academics could afford some of the better things in life, but instead of buying luxury cars like Cadillacs or Mercedes, they chose the decidedly unglamorous, and to Fish's taste ugly, Volvos. They claimed they did so because they were safe. This rationale Fish sees as “emblematic of a basic academic practice, the practice of translating into the language of higher motives desires and satisfactions one is unable or unwilling to acknowledge” (103). The implicit conclusion of Fish’s argument, which he does not draw out but that is in keeping with his version of pragmatism, is to embrace the world we have, which is not so bad and probably better than we think.

I think Fish has put his finger on several dimensions of academic life: the role that feeling plays in professional identity; certain monastic and anti-market strands, especially for those of us in the humanities; and the fraught attitude toward our social position. But I think Fish is wrong on a key point of analysis, on the way that class and taste work, in particular the way that distinction is wrought by education and the way that academic distinctions buttress our class position.

Fish takes the penchant for Volvos as self-abnegation or abjection, but there is another way to look at it. David Brooks, in the popular book Bobos in Paradise, dissects the patterns of and attitudes toward consumption of the new upper middle class, or what he alternately calls “the new bourgeois” (hence “bobos”) or simply “the educated elites.” He diagnoses a central tendency toward an “inversion” of conspicuous consumption. Thorstein Veblen, of course, first diagnosed the tendency of the upper classes a century ago, at the end of the Gilded Age, toward gaudy consumption, toward large mansions, ornate carriages, opulent clothes, and so on, that showed off their fortune. Brooks observes
that the new elites do the opposite. They practice what he calls "financial correctness," aimed at masking rather than advertising wealth, and one of his rules for the new bourgeois is that "Only vulgarians spend lavish amounts of money on luxuries. Cultivated people restrict their lavish spending to necessities" (85). A corollary is the practice of "one-downsmanship," toward lavish spending on basic things like $5000 Jenn-Air stoves, that most people don't see.

This, however, is not a denial of class status but an intensification of class status. It has an added-on value: it is not only very expensive, beyond what ordinary people can afford, but it is only available to the cognoscenti, to those who have the sophisticated taste to know how expensive it is. The add-on is education; it requires both extraordinary wealth and extraordinary education. (Robber barons in Veblen's time had less onerous demands and just had to have money.) In Veblen's terms, it yokes conspicuous leisure with conspicuous consumption and thus multiplies its effect. Part of its value is its inaccessibility, a knowledge available only to others so privileged and like 3-D glasses that allow one to see the more refined value of the stove, or car, or literary work, or cultural theory, and thus mark membership in that higher class cluster.

Such limited access consumption probably carries a feeling of moral superiority, as Fish asserts, but it is hardly self-denial or abjection; rather, it is of a smug superiority, assured not only by one's wealth but by one's education, special knowledge, and consequent taste, whether of Volvos or of books. Inconspicuous conspicuous consumption makes a virtue of inequality of education as well as of wealth. In this light, to choose to buy a Volvo is not a sign of abjection, but a sign of both conspicuous wealth, more than those who drive Ford Escorts and Chevy Cavaliers, and of conspicuous education and the taste it brings with it, more than those who drive Ford Explorers or Chevy Corvettes. It testifies not to our abjection but to other people's subjection; it is not the denial but the embrace of privilege.

One conclusion I take from this is that a good part of our academic affects and feelings devolve upon our class status. They
promote our educational capital, for it is primarily educational capital that gives us status. The problem with this is that the meritocratic code of the professional project assumes a horizontal field, of free movement across the level, whereas in actual operation the profession goes to a great deal of effort to build a vertical platform above the common rabble. The glue and mortar of that platform is taste, and our profession is distinctive, in contrast to many other professions, because it is predicated on the exercise of taste (rather than, say, medical judgment), whether imbibing the caviar of high literature or ironic slumming in the fast food of popular culture.

Another conclusion is that our academic affects and feelings not only work to differentiate us externally, from those outside academe, but internally, within the profession. Indeed, a stunningly large portion of our work—grading, recommendations, tenure reviews, as well as scholarship—is precisely evaluation and differentiation. A good part of academic feeling devolves upon intra-academic status, upon ratings, rankings, and assessments that distinguish not just the things we produce but the people who produce them. Again, the professional project avers that academe is horizontal—a PhD from Ball State is the same credential required to qualify for a job as a PhD from Stanford—but in actual operation it is tenaciously vertical. For all the undoing of hierarchies in the theory years, our own hierarchy seems to have survived nicely. Like most hierarchies, it seems natural, and given the job crisis, it has intensified rather than shrunken.

It is perhaps uncontroversial that class affects us—although intellectuals from Gouldner’s “new class” on are frequently deemed to be classless or somehow transcend class—but what I find most striking about Fish’s account is that he gravitates toward seeing things in terms of morality, not taste, or class, or money. He portrays our world, fittingly for a Miltonist, as a metaphysical one where the primary action is a moral struggle, rather than a material one, of people who work. If there is a hereafter, this way of seeing the world might help you, but for an unbeliever like me, it is part of the problem.
Which brings me back to Gallagher's essay. Gallagher actually shares with Fish a moral concern. First, "We Compositionists" is an instance of the professional jeremiad: the profession is suffering from its ill repair; it needs to be engaged more; let's get more engaged. This is a typical move of professionalism, despite Gallagher's caveats about professionalization: professions, in the account of sociologist M.S. Larson, always advert to a higher calling and public relevance. It also plays out the dynamic that Bruce Robbins shows in Secular Vocations, that professions resort to an outside to reaffirm the inside. Gallagher's call is of course not a bad idea—who would disagree that we need public relevance, and have a responsibility to a public?—but such a call is primarily self-confirming ("Can I get an Amen?") if not empty. If we teach people what humanistic knowledge is, they presumably become better educated citizens. We should not have a bad conscience about this. In the common adjectival use of the word, we should do so in a professional way.

Second, Gallagher's essay, like Fish's, adopts a moral tone. It is an earnest tone instead of an abrasive one, staking out a middle road between two poles and adopting a centrist position between radical and apologist. Gallagher himself takes the position of balanced mediator ("shucks, guys, let's find a compromise"). I do not think that this is the best road. It embraces the current form of political rhetoric, of what I would call "two-sidism," that there are two sides to every argument (Democrat and Republican), and most people reside in the middle. But oftentimes, as with current politics, there are more than two sides, and the two advertised poles do not represent the span of possible solutions, and in fact often function to obscure those solutions. In my view, Bousquet's argument for labor rights and recognition of those laboring, especially those with inferior positions and inequitable power, is simply a more just and humane position. Bousquet's rhetoric is no doubt oppositional, but labor injustice is something that we should oppose, and it is not arrogant insofar as he has, more than anyone, stood up persistently for the rights of workers, particularly workers with less than a full franchise, such as grad students and adjuncts, who
teach the bulk of the bread-and-butter FTEs of almost all English departments.

Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Notes

1. In "History as a Challenge to the Idea of the University," I took to task the tendency of much writing on the university to gravitate toward large conceptual schemes that do not accurately reflect the actual history of the university and that suffer from the metaphysical conceit that a few ideas have generated the university rather than historical practices generating ways that we speak about them. Bill Readings' The University in Ruins, cited seemingly everywhere as if established fact, is a recent example, effectively boiling the history down to "three ideas: the Kantian concept of reason, the Humboldtian idea of culture, and now the techno-bureaucratic notion of excellence" (14). This is simply inaccurate in terms of the American university, which instantiates many other ideas (for instance, Jefferson's notion of educating citizens in the new art of democracy, which stems from a policy of equality, and which morphed to the post-World War II policy of meritocracy and practice of mass education, unique in the history of the institution), and which never particularly represented Reason (more likely religious faith in the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries) or national culture (more likely agricultural and industrial development during the rise of state universities through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). But one point that Readings makes, among many striking points, is that "accountability" has currently been rendered in terms of accounting. This point I find much more accurate to the current institution, which seems governed by the policies of capital accumulation and given more concertedly to practices of industrial development.

2. In view of law, these standards are not indeterminate but established according to previous practice in a department. If you have six articles and are denied tenure, but the past four candidates for tenure in your department had four or five articles, you are a very good bet to win a court case.

3. As M.S. Larson puts it in her standard Rise of Professionalism, "As a profession strengthens its ties with formal institutions of training, it also obtains a base of broader subcultural standardization: the professional school or university spawn a subculture of their own, to which numbers of
apprentices are exposed. Thus, cognitive standardization appears to be one crucial, if not the most crucial, variable in the sequence which... leads to credentialed professionalization" (45–46). Larson is more interested in defining the structures that create professionalism; I am more interested in the more flangible dimension of feeling. I also have in mind Dick Hebdige's assessment of subcultures, which attain their identities and bond through what he terms "style." Though the cliché of the tweed jacket with elbow patches might be like the style of a punk's mohawk, I think that academic identity is more expressed through feeling and behavior.

4. To be sure, JAC has published a few pieces sympathetic to affective inquiry, and Lynn Worsham has contributed "Going Postal."

6. One distinction that might make more sense of the tension that Gallagher dwells on is the sociologist Steven Brint's between "public service" professionals and "expert" professionals. Brint charts the course over the twentieth century of professionals moving from general to very specialized quadrants of public application. Another is Andrew Abbott's fractal theory of disciplines and subdisciplines; Abbott ascertains that subdisciplines or subfields (in other words, like comp) internally differentiate themselves as disciplines do, with hierarchies, stars, etc. of their own.

Works


Fish, Stanley. "Anti-Professionalism." *Doing What Comes Naturally:*


