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## Polemic: Academic Publication and the Humanities

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## Polemic: Academic Publication and the Humanities

If we can trust rumor and the Institutional Plan, Grand Valley aspires to become a research institution, a diminished replica of the vast multiversities that formed most of us teachers. To promote this effort at collective self-transcendence, the College is sending out a message: from now on, the rewards and emoluments (and new appointments) go to publishing scholars and all others are invited to feel uneasy — not threatened, for the Big Time is not yet, but tolerated, like the working poor.

My argument here is that the emphasis on publication may be depended upon to further dehumanize the humanities and to degrade the teaching mission. My argument bears only on the humanities (and my evidence comes mainly from literary study) but within that scope my position is absolute and intransigent. Some people may affect a more temperate, balanced, fair-minded posture, protesting that scholarly publication is, after all, a good thing in itself. Some reasonable colleague will argue that, after all, tightening the screws is a quality-enhancing technique well established among those charged with “managing the knowledge worker.” (After all, some poetic type may sweetly add, didn’t Emily Dickinson herself say, “The Attar from the Rose / Be not expressed by Suns — Alone / It is the gift of Screws”?) And after all, the screws may be torqued down in an enlightened fashion: publication may be regarded as one measure, among others, of productivity.

I dissociate myself utterly from such accommodating and complaisant attitudes. Academic publication is not just one option among others and, most of the time, is not a good in itself. It is a vivid danger to humane endeavors. It is a vortex, a Charybdis to steer away from at all costs. This is true for a hundred different reasons, any one of which renders the other ninety-nine redundant. Let me point to just a few.

In the humanities, publication as an academic industry takes its inspiration from the sciences, where it is probably defensible. There knowledge can be plausibly abstracted from a knower and mortared into a theoretical structure, a paradigm, free-standing and coherent. Indeed, in its sublimity, the structure is disproportionate to the mere mortals who toiled in their multitudes to create it. The names of the toilers are, for

the most part, forgotten. Even when we remember names, our interest is not scientific but historical or quaintly human. The work of giants — Einstein, say — becomes an integral part of the edifice, like a nicely cut stone at Chartres, its carver's identity melted into a heaven-aspiring arch. In a special sense, even the geniuses whose names we honor are anonymous workers dissolved into something larger and other.

I would not, of course, presume to speak of science in my own voice. But all this is now common knowledge. Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, celebrates thus the peculiar anonymity of the famous:

Why, after all, should the student of physics, for example, read the works of Newton, Faraday, Einstein, or Schrodinger, when everything he needs to know about these works is recapitulated in a far briefer, more precise, and more systematic form in a number of up-to-date textbook?

The edifice of science can never sprawl. Original contributions can be so identified, and each reposes in its niche, no trouble to anyone and retrievable when needed. Data can never become disorderly, nor can knowledge over-tax the generalizing power of the system. Even anomalies have a use: they engender new paradigms that will digest them. Moreover, though the realms of knowledge expand and expand, the conceptual powers required of the expert, together with the term of the apprenticeship, remain fairly constant. Thus competent youngsters know more and know better than any seasoned genius of the past. (Also, as often noted, child prodigies occur in science, chess, and music, never in philosophy, history, theology, criticism, literature.) When literary scholarship tries to imitate the sciences, the result is quite other. There is no edifice, only accumulation. What to do with it? Trust the editors of learned journals? Then we must read everything, for it is all valuable — and none of it is fungible, none of it can be digested in textbooks. Mistrust the editors? Then we must read everything in order to judge for ourselves. Either way, the printed word becomes Leviathan. Wilt thou take him for a servant? Not likely.

Yet in some respects the scientific model has well served humane study. Yes, *served*, as ancilla or humble, self-sacrificing handmaiden. It is in this capacity that philology or German scholarship, so called, deserves to be honored. We are indebted to these quasi-scientists for giving us clean texts — the gift above all others — and then the grammars and glossaries and historical background and all ancillary matters properly condensed in footnotes. It would be churlish to disparage the bequest of a century and more of numbing labor. Thanks to such support services, the words of the dead are modified in the guts of the living.

But such scholarship itself remains numbing labor, drudgery, not self-realization. For the most part, we must honor the scholar as Browning does in "A Grammarian's

Funeral.” The now-defunct Grammarian compels admiration of a sort: the admiration due to the stylites. (The comparison is mine, not Browning’s.) Like those spectacular ascetics, the scholar spurns life (and literature) in favor of an entity incomparably higher and other. In his case, the entity is not exactly God but Knowledge. He — “a man born with thy face and throat, Lyric Apollo” — sacrifices his beautiful body and voice without even the tribute of regret, all in order to contribute to Knowledge. Browning’s poem traces the Grammarian’s progress from youthful decrepitude, “cramped and diminished,” through ever more appalling stages of morbidity. Friends warn him: “. . . time escapes: Live now or never!” The scholar, however, worships Knowledge — not what *he* knows, not what comes alive in his viscera, but what is or will be known, for this scholar’s higher is unapproachably other: “What’s time? Leave Now for dogs and apes! Man has forever.” So warm blooded men are to be sacrificed on the cold altar of Man. And what contribution has this scholar made? A true scientist, he has solved problems: he has cleared up the difficulties attendant on three minor function words in Greek:

While he could stammer  
 He settled *Hoti*’s business — Let it be! —  
 Properly based *Oun* —  
 Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic *De*,  
 Dead from the waist down.

The word *doctrine* here subtly suggests the peculiar theology of the grammarian.

The real-world model of German scholarship was, and probably remains, Klaeber’s literally stunning edition of *Beowulf* — a 647 page compendium of text, notes, bibliography, glossary, etc. In this morass, the text of the relatively short poem appears almost incidental. My old teacher Frederic Cassidy — himself a philologist in a class with James Murray of the *OED* — characterized the work as a thin slice of meat between two thick slabs of dry bread. The work represents a lifetime of effort to digest a mountain of scholarly production and make it available to the reader of the poem. In effect, it interposes a mountain between the reader and the poem; indeed, much of the material points — in despair, I fancy — at still other material. Perhaps buried in the midden there is something illuminating. Who knows?

My intent is not to deride Klaeber but to insist on the consequences of following the wrong model. Proliferating science does not amount to clutter and distraction. Present science builds on the past. But scholarly production in the humanities is a dead giant on our shoulders. Secondary material provokes tertiary material. Murray Krieger, who has spent a lifetime (or made a career) of criticizing critics, dedicates a book to a critic of critics of critics. One can imagine an infinite regression, each

stage further removed from the human heart of literature.

The sensible treatment for such feverish industry is to cool it, but the opposite is happening. Since more and more careers depend more and more on publication, more and more periodicals and presses have been spawned to suck up the mandated production. Finally, just to survey the publishing scene becomes a research project: hence the biennial publication by the Modern Language Association of a *Directory of Periodicals* in language and literature. (There are now over 1100 such periodicals in the U.S. and and Canada.) The *MLA Directory* is in no sense a consumer's guide. No, this is a producer's guide, a marketing tool. For the miracle of scholarly production is that it defies all the laws of supply and demand. There are no consumers. There is no demand for it. Yet the ever-growing supply always finds an outlet. Were American farmers to learn what scholars know, there would never be unsalable agricultural surpluses, no matter how depressed the market, how bumper the crop, or how moldy the produce.

No consumers and moldy fruit. If this sounds like rhetorical extremism, consider the most prestigious of the 1100-odd scholarly journals, *PMLA*. Would, or could, anyone read anything in this journal — except, of course as part of one's own efforts to publish in *PMLA*? I have never met such a person. I have myself dutifully examined *PMLA* for about ten years and found in its tortured minutiae and its neutered prose the witness to promotion, tenure, and pay increases but little of humane interest. Attar from the Rose indeed! Ah, no doubt some gentle reader will ask by what authority I look down my nose at my betters. Well, I have no gracious answer to that.

But what about the authority of Edmund Wilson? In 1968, toward the end of a long life as as all-around man of letters, Wilson wrote a series of articles entitled "The Fruits of the MLA." He adjudged those fruits moldy. Of *PMLA*, he opined that it "contains for the most part unreadable articles on literary problems and discoveries of very minute or no interest." Of the MLA project to give us clean texts of American authors (itself a commendable design), he could not speak so kindly. He criticized the MLA's scientific piety over details, especially those of minute or no literary interest. (For example, one editor, says Wilson, "establishes that 'Ihlang-ihlang' is to be hyphenated. . . without any attempt to tell us what 'Ihlang-ihlang' is — a perfume or a face lotion? a real product or an invention. . . ? and if invention, a parody of what?") Of course, the MLA editors were not exactly chastened or contrite; in their responses, they accused Wilson of. . . well, what else but errors of detail, together with "infantilism" and "petulant ill-humor"? That may or may not be rhetorical extremism on their part. The point is that the gentle reader will have to decide which authority will judge the scholarly material he is too humble to judge for himself.

My proleptic ear discerns another objection: after all, scholarly journals are not supposed to appeal to general interest. These are the organs whereby specialists have intercourse with other specialists. Specialist studies in literature are as vital to the humanities as, say, ant studies are to biology: to wit, the grounds for vast generalizations that compel the interest of everyone. After all, think of sociobiology, with its quasi-theological tenets, all coming out of E. O. Wilson's studies of ants. Furthermore, isn't specialization necessary if we cherish depth and abhor superficiality?

Hmmm! If what I hear is more than an auditory hallucination, it is more evidence of the humanities' yearning for the peculiar authority of the sciences. But the analogy won't hold, for reasons adumbrated above. In the sciences, there is a structure (Kuhn's paradigm) and what becomes a part of that structure is determined altogether by the only people who can possibly judge: the scientists themselves, members of the "scientific community." But if the word *humanities* has any meaning, it refers to matters which engage us all, as humans, not as roles or abstract functions. Kuhn assumes as much when he observes that ". . .there are no communities [other than the scientific] in which individual creative work is so exclusively addressed to and evaluated by other members of the profession." Kuhn's next remark suggests that he knows nothing about the specialist enclaves in the humanities: "The most esoteric of poets or the most abstract of theologians is far more concerned than the scientist with lay approbation." Clearly, Kuhn has never tried to read, for example, the *Milton Quarterly*.

As for superficiality, we are all vulnerable to that, always. To write more and more about less and less for an audience ever more inbred — such a formula will hardly induce profundity. More likely, it will muffle the Big Questions: So what? And who cares? Let scientists affirm facts because they are facts. Our interest in literature and art and philosophy, I suggest, ought always to be Darwinian: how does this work help me live? How does this fact — the hyphen in *Ihlang-ihlang* or the flavor of *Hoti* — make me more human?

To be sure, we should not oversimplify the answers or expect immediate gratifications. I do not propose as model the student who could not see any dollar bills in our poetry book. We could learn this much from biology: that our thought processes, like energy circuits in a healthy ecosystem, should be neither short nor simple. No doubt, we must learn about *Hoti* and much more in order to translate Sophocles' Greek into an understanding of how Necessity and Freedom conspire to exalt whom they destroy.

But after all such disclaimers, the Big Questions remain, insistent, ubiquitous, downright physiological. It is folly to imagine that division of labor will yield understanding as a final product, a reification begotten by management upon teamwork and

available as a gift for the collective abstraction Man. No, understanding is thought made visceral; it is a personal effect, an affair of the body, a rapture of the heart, the flesh in transport, like orgasm, not like a NASA project, not like the sum of everything that anyone has ever said about anything related to something related to *Beowulf*. Yeats's lonely Tower is still the fit symbol, not a NASA gantry fornicating [*sic*] with one-eyed specialists.

In all the verbiage pouring out of humanities departments, is there then nothing at all worth reading? Is it all careerism and drudgery? Well, it should be obvious that to damn the system is not to damn those who rise above it, and equally obvious that those few do not justify the system. For my part, I gratefully acknowledge that my own encounters with great literature were mediated by certain great critics. In the late 40's and 50's, my blood was stirred by the likes of I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Rene Wellek, Austin Warren — all rebels within the system. Even now, my tired blood is stirred by Hugh Kenner and Helen Vendler, better described as intimates of art than as critics. These people, and others, are masters. They instruct, humble, and excite.

But their example does not deflect my argument. The system ought to lead us to the best and filter out the rest. It ought to foster understanding as an experience. In a word, it ought to teach. But Leviathan has other aims. Modelling itself on the sciences and then accommodating itself to the survivalist strategies of thousands of ambitious or menaced academicians, it has so bemired us in our published effluent that we may justifiably curse Gutenberg and his damned moveable type.

Were the system merely mistaken or untidy or absurd or wasteful, one might regard it — or ignore it — with humor. Were it merely the expression of generalized mediocrity, that would be nothing against it; mediocrity, as statistical concept, necessarily includes most of us. But Leviathan is an immediate and abiding threat. The drive toward specialist coterie, urged and indeed made imperative by the pressure to publish, amounts to an assault on the fellowship or sense of intellectual community that should animate relations among teachers. We have here a case of skewed incentives: a college, in its misguided pursuit of quality, motivates its teachers to direct their best energies *away* from college affairs. Hence the real working colleagues of a Miltonist, say, are not the rhetoric specialist in the next office or the professional feminist down the corridor but the cloistered virtuosi who publish in the *Milton Quarterly*.

That hypothetical example may seem to exaggerate conditions on the local scene. Maybe so, maybe no. Nonetheless, the principle there crudely exemplified is palpably at work on this campus. For a real-life example, consider the colloquia sponsored by the Humanities Division and by individual departments therein. These ought to be

vital events in the life of the college and there ought to be substantial incentives impelling teachers to speak to and listen to their co-workers. The college ought to insist that such activity be every teacher's duty (and desire as well). Status, promotion, salary, tenure — these ought to fuel the colloquia as now they fuel the centrifugal efforts of faculty members. But the reality is something else. The colloquia are never sell-out affairs. There is a core of regular auditors — a scant dozen — who seem fascinated by ideas at work in living bodies. Then there are a few people who come, I presume, as a courtesy to a particular speaker or maybe because of their specialist's passion for the topic. In any case, they will never materialize at another session. As for the talks themselves: some are attempts to engage fellow teachers in a problem of common concern. But some, I venture to say, are not addresses, or spoken essays, at all. They are reports from the heights, heliographic signals from someone up there researching. The real business of the speaker is conducted up there, among fellow specialists. Or so I intuit.

My impressions may be wrong, of course, but I can affirm without fear of contradiction that none of the talks, however engaging, had or is likely to have any consequences. Each talk (yes, my own included) is a performance, self-contained, with a beginning, a middle, and an end — a dead end. No sequel. No talk represents an installment in a continuing dialogue. No talk is a reply to or addition to any other. I say this with sadness and sympathy, for we are all predisposed by powerful academic mores which inhibit any sustained intellectual traffic among people who, as the wise saying has it, are held together by little more than a parking problem.

Something of the sort may also be said of *The Grand Valley Review*. It may be a breach of decorum to predict, in the pages of *The Review*, that academic custom will undo this journal. Here again we have an instrument that ought to be vital to the life of the college, yet there is neither incentive nor tradition to funnel to its pages the best efforts of the faculty. There are no screws pressuring us to write to one another about things that matter to our common profession: teaching. Thus it is that many who read this polemic will find it ill considered; yet no one, I am willing to bet, will feel constrained to correct my misrepresentations and illogicalities.

There are other casualties of Leviathan: the students. For students sense, in some region of their psyche, that the talk about liberal education is mainly fraud. They know that the official curriculum recommends not only a broad range of subjects but also urges a corresponding passion for the humane implications of those subjects. Darwin, Freud, Sophocles, Bach, Michelangelo — our whole cultural inheritance makes our lives vivid and intense. The great open the eyes of our eyes, et cetera. To be deaf and blind to them is to be deaf and blind, by self-mutilation, et cetera, et cetera.

So says the ceremonial curriculum. The hidden curriculum — hidden from no one — conveys quite another message. It tells students that humanities teachers are technicians and job holders, like professors of marketing and tourist management but not nearly so candid. Well may the Institutional Plan speak of “teaching. . . actively modelling the life of the mind.” Well may it talk about “the search for meaning” and the “campus ambience that supports a genuine sense of intellectual community.” Until the Plan sponsors incentives and instruments to promote this “active modelling” and this “campus ambience,” we may justly regard such flourishes with a cold and cynical eye. The humane concerns at times histrionically modelled in the classroom will remain “merely academic.” (Oh, the wisdom in that cliché!) These concerns find little expression in academic life outside the sternly allotted 50-minute hour — not in faculty colloquia, not in intramural publications, not in that impalpable but determinative thing called campus ambience. (One wonders what kind of models students might find in the scholarly literature if, by perverse chance, they should look there.) A college, freshmen soon learn, is not a community, intellectual or otherwise, but only an organization.

The difference between a community of intellectuals and an organization may be observed in the process that gave us the General Education Program. This curricular matter was treated as an organizational problem and solved by committees. That is, an object of eternal contemplation for teachers — the very definition of education by reference to its content — was disposed of at the periphery of college activity. In no case did anyone treat this matter with the high seriousness devoted, let’s say, to the double negative in Wordsworth or, for that matter, to any other so-called *professional* undertaking. Study and reflection resulting in a considered statement, in an essay of publishable quality addressed to colleagues and dealing with a topic of vital, inexhaustible interest to any educator — *that* is simply unimaginable within the organization. *That*, academic tradition tells us, is not part of a professor’s profession (unless he is a specialist in curriculum, heaven help us). To be sure, some people have given deep thought to general education but no one tried to persuade or discuss at a level commensurate with those much vaunted scholarly norms.

The blame for all this should be spread around, no doubt, but at least some of the onus lies with the scientific research model that formed the multiversities and which, now, Grand Valley is trying to imitate. Generally, imitation represents a failure of imagination, and in this case the imitation is not practical either. If we want the “intellectual community” celebrated in the Institutional Plan (surely a practical document), we’ll have to bend our efforts in that direction. That means, I think, we must talk to one another, not casually, not in the desultory idiom of committees,

but intensely, as though our livelihood depended on such talk instead of on publication. Everything in this world is in short supply, including our energy and powers of concentration — and those resources we might otherwise drop into the vast and watery wastes of the scholarship industry, without noticeable effect, we would do well to apply here at home. I have suggested some tangible uses for our mental energies: faculty colloquia, an intramural journal, committee work that honors scholarly norms. A little imagination might conjure up other devices. For example, the General Education Program promises many sections of certain courses, semester after semester. That means that certain topics will be of common concern to quite a number of people. Why not produce, for each course, a collection of essays by various hands? Not isolated statements but investments in a continuing dialogue. These collections might be kept on reserve in the library, where students could see evidence of “intellectual community.” Moreover, let those expressions serve as the bases for faculty evaluation. We need not always defer to the editors in judging the qualities of mind of our colleagues.

Activities of this sort should, I hope, appease the practical and organizational tendencies among us. But there remains another practical consideration. What is more practical than high-minded pleasure? Humane studies are not just professions. Lay people study the arts and literature and philosophy for pleasure, that is to say for purposes of self-realization. Why should the professionals give the impression they are at enmity with joy? Browning’s *Grammarians* is not a fit role model; he’s an image problem. So too the scholarly journals.