What Has *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* Got to Do with Academic Publishing Anyway?

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What Has The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance Got To Do With Academic Publishing Anyway?

Perhaps it is because I grew up surrounded by farm folk that I have fastened onto Anthony Parise's agricultural metaphor in his "Polemic: Academic Publication and the Humanities," in last spring's Grand Valley Review. Tony's metaphor argues that scholars have learned to sell what no one really wants:

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.

My product here may suffer more from under-ripeness than mold, but as market day has arrived and it is my only product, I sell where I can.

I take the central argument to be that the model of research in the sciences does not make sense in the humanities. Science, it is claimed, has an organizing paradigm by which the work of thousands of busy practitioners is transformed into one beautiful, clean honeycomb; the minutia collected by thousands of buzzing humanists erects Pandemonium. Thus for humanists "it is folly to imagine that division of labor will yield understanding as a final product."

From ground-level, where I live, it is hard to tell. Phytopathology doesn't look much cleaner or more significant to me than Milton Quarterly. And division of labor is the only way I know how to work. If I try to hoe the whole garden, I never do as good a job around the turnips as the lettuce.

Last semester I was in a favorite patch of lettuce, teaching Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five, when I saw a fact I had never seen before: Vonnegut's oddly named hero Billy Pilgrim, caught behind German lines, says to a couple of other American soldiers "you guys go on without me." This, of course, is what wounded soldiers or cowboys dying of thirst always say to their comrades, so as not to slow them down. Except Billy was saying it because he was tired. He wanted to be left alone to rest. And suddenly I remembered John Wayne in a long-ago movie looking at Jimmy Stewart in an apron and giving him the derisive name that became Wayne's by-line: "Well hello Pilgrim." At the time, I may never find another one of feverish begotten off one another — yet unwritten — to it.

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line: “Well hello

Pilgrim.” At that moment an article was born. A rather small and esoteric article, that

may never find an audience, and that will hardly soften the din of those thousands

d feverish bees publishing in the 1100 or so extant journals. That article has spun

off another — “American Foreign Policy and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence” —

yet unwritten because I can not imagine the fit audience, though few who might listen
to it.

Why then write it? I'm not sure, but it has something to do with my father's farm.

Even when another bumper crop was in the offing, and there were no consumers in

ight, we'd still go out and till and weed and harvest. Not for any consumer, but just

ecause that was our life. That is what we did. That is what it meant to be a farmer,
to grow things.

One other thing. We always had a garden, just for ourselves.

Now just this year I have grown and published a turnippy little fact (I brought an
unpublished poem by Thomas Hardy to light). It didn't help the scholarly community
or the debate on General Education here at Grand Valley one little bit. But it kept
me working as a farmer in the field until this moment when I began writing this reply
for The Grand Valley Review. This Review, by the way, one of Tony's ideas for a more
real sharing than scholarly journals allow, I take to be like the garden farmers always
keep, on which they lavish extra care, because it must feed them. That garden often
produces more of real use than the huge fields which surround it. But without the
fields, the farmer is not a farmer but a gardener.

This article and the kind of article one might try to write for the Milton Quarterly
are quite different crops; this one takes a different kind of care, more power and greater
significance and intenser beauty. This present article is not as powerful nor as beautiful
as the polemic which inspired it. It does have a significant kernel, however, which is
this: yes, let us use more of our energies in faculty colloquia, intense talk, and careful
essays for each other. We can create a wonderful garden that way. Let's keep ploughing
the fields as well.