

Editor's Column: Having a Spine— Facing the Crisis in Scholarly Publishing

JUDGING FROM THE VARIETY OF VOICES JOINED IN THE DIS-
cussion of how to address the predicament in scholarly publishing
that besets the humanities in the United States academy, it is clear
that the issue has become a concern even in institutions in which the pub-
lication of a book is not required for the conferral of tenure. For beyond
the credentialing function that books may have in some institutions, at
stake ultimately is the circulation of ideas on which intellectual work is
predicated. The sense of urgency that surrounds all discussions of the
issue and the mobilization of individuals, institutions, and organizations
that it has occasioned attest to the extent of its impact on our disciplines.

Of the many suggestions that have been advanced to deal with the
crisis, two have been received with particular enthusiasm because of
their seeming viability. The first is that universities move away from “the
book” as the unit of measure in tenure and promotion cases and that the
candidate produce a collection of articles as the corpus to be evaluated
instead. The second is that universities establish for humanities depart-
ments a publication subvention attached to every junior professor’s line,
much like—but requiring far less funding than—the start-up capital that
faculty positions in the sciences are endowed with as a matter of course.

The members of the MLA had an opportunity to consider the first
of these ideas in two opinion pieces by Lindsay Waters in *PMLA* (“Mod-
est Proposal” [2000]) and in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (“Res-
cue Tenure” [2001]).¹ In his two articles, Waters argued cogently for the
end of what he terms the “tyranny of the monograph,” the dependence
on the book as the principal unit of scholarship in the humanities: “. . . I
think the members of the MLA should rise up and insist that these
expectations be demolished and that other, more modest expectations be

erected in their place" ("Modest Proposal" 315). Waters goes on to propose a collection of significant articles as the alternative to the monograph in tenure reviews: "The best way to end the current system is to initiate a renaissance of the scholarly article—the article is an endangered species—and to have the publication of two or three high-impact essays count in most cases for tenure" (317).

Two recent documents amplify on Waters's proposal by including it in a wider consideration of the problem and by addressing recommendations specifically to the several constituencies involved: departments, librarians, publishers, and university administrators. The first is a compelling "special letter" sent to all members of the MLA by Stephen Greenblatt, the association's president for 2002. Titled "Call for Action on Problems in Scholarly Book Publishing," Greenblatt's missive entreats faculty members to reconsider with their colleagues, promotion committees, and deans whether "the book" should continue being the sine qua non for tenure and promotion. Coming as they do from an intellectually unimpeachable source, Greenblatt's recommendations have commanded a great deal of attention, a fact shown by the intense correspondence to MLA headquarters that the letter has generated as well as by anecdotal accounts of recent promotion dossiers being forwarded to extradepartmental tenure committees with a copy of Greenblatt's letter in tow. The second document that echoes Waters's proposal is a report by the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly Publishing printed in *Profession 2002*, which is also destined to have a sustained impact because of the thoroughness of its analysis and the comprehensiveness of its recommendations (Ryan et al.). The report should be required reading and the subject of immediate discussion in departments and among the various constituencies to which its recommendations are directed. If departments wait until they confront a tenure or promotion decision to discuss the professional is-

sues the report raises, they will not be able to address its implications fully and dispassionately.²

The proposal of publication subvention for junior professors was advanced most notably in a call for discussion issued by an ad hoc subcommittee of the MLA Executive Council in the association's fall 2002 newsletter:

Should all tenure-track positions in language and literature be accompanied by a \$5,000–\$7,000 book subvention? Although a subvention of this amount would not cover all costs of publication, it would be of major assistance to scholars at the beginning of their careers. New appointees might receive a letter of commitment that they could submit to a publisher along with a manuscript. The subvention would be provided only after a book manuscript had gone through the normal scholarly review process and been accepted for publication. The funds might be restricted to a book subvention and not be made available for other purposes: unused funds would thus eventually be recycled for use by new appointees. We note in this context that such a subvention represents but a small fraction of the salary and benefits devoted to tenure-track faculty members. It also represents much less than start-up costs in the laboratory sciences. . . . Although there is special need to provide such funds where a book is expected for tenure, there is good reason to provide this option to all humanities faculty members. (Chow et al.)

Both proposed solutions for offsetting the crisis in scholarly publishing have clear merits and owe most of their appeal to their straightforward positioning with respect to "the book." The first (considering a collection of articles in lieu of a book in promotion and tenure cases) proposes redefining the acceptable corpus to be evaluated and, therefore, abandoning the noxious terrain on which the current system is built. The problem of finding a publication venue would thus be resolved through the ingenious strategy of changing the rules of the game yet awarding the same prize in the end (tenure). The second proposal (publication subvention) accepts the status quo and its rules (the book as primary cri-

terion for promotion and tenure) but seeks to infuse it with increased funds, a move that goes straight to the economic roots of the problem. The first demands that we have the courage to revise our standards and challenge our prejudices about the value of articles relative to books (not an inconsiderable undertaking), but in the end it is cost-free and up to us, as long as we can persuade our extradepartmental colleagues and administrators to agree to its terms; the second requires that new funds be obtained, makes equal demands on us to challenge our prejudices—this time about the role of money in the publication of scholarship—and asks us to depend on the kindness of quasi strangers (administrators).

Both these possibilities will encounter varying degrees of resistance in several quarters for compelling reasons. The proposal that candidates be allowed to present a collection of articles for tenure review is suspect because it is almost invariably accompanied by a denigration of “the book” as an object of scholarly achievement: the academic book has been fetishized, it has been overproduced, it lacks a market, it is too expensive, and so on. Yet it appears that we only awoke to this reality after circumstances beyond our control made it convenient for us to devalue the book, and so we look as if we were now placing expediency before intellectual and professional principle: we are liable to be seen as pragmatic but also inconstant in our values and requirements. Our foremost concern must always be how to preserve the integrity of our scholarly contributions, not how to beat the system merely because it now constrains us. Furthermore, in a perceptive and nuanced rejoinder to Waters’s articles, Philip Lewis has sounded a skeptical note about the move toward articles as the new corpus for tenure consideration. The plight of humanities journals, he argues,

is all too similar to that of academic book publishing: we have too many, few of them are thriving, many older journals have lost their sense of identity and mission, many newer ones suffer from a dearth of institutional sub-

scriptions and from inadequate support for beleaguered editors, and all are caught up in the same system of producing and disseminating knowledge that generates too many books for too few readers. Don’t we, then, face an eventual shakedown in the spheres of both book and journal publication? (1223–24)

In other words, might we be embracing as our putative deliverer an instrument as compromised as the one we are forswearing?

Another consideration is that as long as university presses continue to publish *some* manuscripts (even if fewer than previously), moving the publishing expectations for tenure away from “the book” will remain a choice, one not likely to be exercised by institutions that interpret publication of a book manuscript by a university press—even more so now than in the past—as a sign of the highest quality of scholarship. The probable result will be an unfortunate exacerbation of the elite-other divide among United States academic institutions. Any proposal that aims to deal with the publishing crisis should attempt to alleviate such a divide, not reinforce it. In suggesting that the academy comprehensively review its practices, Lewis wonders “how a vast and diverse system with little central regulation can be restructured so as to induce colleges and universities to adopt appropriate, institution-specific criteria for granting tenure and for understanding the obligations of tenured faculty members” (1224). But the translation of this perspective into real terms—a sliding scale of tenure and promotion standards—could lead to an even more entrenched system of university rankings than the present one. It would also leave unaddressed the vast institutional expanse along that scale—and more precisely the middle territory in which an institution’s reward for enhancing its standing is most seductive.

The proposal that universities create a publication subvention for junior faculty members on the tenure track shows an inventiveness to which we should all aspire when dealing with the institutional problems that afflict us. It has in

its favor a bold claim to university resources on a par with those allocated to the sciences and a strength that derives from trying to make the existing system work as well as it seemed to in the past. Appropriately, then, the call for discussion by the ad hoc subcommittee of the Executive Council begins with a paean to the book:

While electronic publishing and publishing on demand will no doubt prove viable outlets for some publications, like many of you we believe the traditional scholarly book is well worth preserving. Neither its convenience nor its cultural impact has been supplanted. Indeed it is ironic that the academic book—not just in English and foreign languages but also in anthropology, art history, education, and many other fields—is being economically threatened at the very moment when recovered works of literature are receiving their first detailed scholarly analysis and new methodologies are offering fresh insights into our traditional canons. (Chow et al.)

Indeed, the current system evolved because it offers distinct advantages to all concerned, not least the candidate for promotion. Having the manuscript evaluated by a third party (the press) ostensibly ensures that the process is handled impartially, that the referees can count on the protection of their anonymity and so can be as searching as possible in their assessment and critique of the work, and that if the study is judged significant enough, the press will add it to the published list. If “the book” has become the principal piece of scholarly evidence introduced by candidates for their tenure cases, it is not necessarily because it is fetishized but rather because built into the writing and publication of a book are safeguards that purport to ensure the quality of the final product (though they may not always do so in fact). Now that this avowedly impartial process is no longer available to a sufficiently large number of our colleagues, our discipline faces a crisis of legitimation that the two proposals delineated above attempt to address.

The weakness of the subvention model lies precisely in its courageous attempt to address

frontally the economic underpinnings of the publishing crisis. For the publishing-subvention idea derives its force from the fact that it leaves the existing system untouched, yet its intention to attach funds universally to junior faculty lines conspires against the avowed qualities of impartiality and disinterestedness that made the process what it is. The ad hoc subcommittee argues that the “subvention would be provided only after a book manuscript had gone through the normal scholarly review process and been accepted for publication” (Chow et al.). But the promise of a subvention would make it impossible to claim that a manuscript had indeed undergone the normal review process, inasmuch as that process was predicated on the intrinsic merits of the manuscript. One cannot remedy a crisis of legitimation by introducing into the system under pressure an element that creates legitimation problems of a different kind. True, one might argue that if every book project carried with it a subvention, the advantage the subvention represents would be shared by everyone and would therefore not undermine the impartiality of the review process. But one can also imagine that the universal availability of subventions might lead to the sort of overpublication decried as one of the principal factors that brought us to the present pass. Furthermore, the availability of publishing subventions in general would be compromised by the severe fiscal crisis now faced by public institutions, a development that would reinforce the inequities that such universities already experience with respect to private institutions.

Nevertheless, the subvention initiative importantly recognizes the singular value of the academic book. Anyone who has written a manuscript, submitted it for consideration to a press, and seen it through to publication can attest to the intense and compelling intellectual experience that the entire affair represents: the choice of texts, the marshaling of sources and evidence, the construction of an argument that spans several chapters, the bibliographic research, the engagement with the readers' reports, the reading

of proofs, the choice of journals for review, and so on. It is, as I expressed in sincere bewilderment in the prologue to one of my books, “a protracted and somewhat enigmatic process to which many people contribute, sometimes unbeknownst to them” (ix). Writing a series of articles—irrespective of the taut links that may connect them—does not measure up in the aggregate to the experience of conceiving and writing a book. The reader of a book also receives its argument in a condensed and organic manner that a series of related articles published seriatim can never hope to match. Hence, before we counsel our younger colleagues to give up on writing a book and to direct their efforts exclusively to the publishing of articles, we should exhaust all other options available. For instance, why not continue the practice—where applicable—of considering the book manuscript of a candidate for promotion or tenure but uncouple the manuscript’s worth as determined by internal and external reviewers (and therefore its author’s tenure prospects) from its fortunes in search of a publisher? Under this arrangement, a candidate’s attempts to place a manuscript with a press would not be bound by the frantic deadlines imposed by tenure consideration, and the author would have time to make any requested revisions. Moving away from “the book” and toward a series of articles as the minimum corpus for a tenure review presumes that scholars may as well not even write books but should concentrate instead on producing what has the greater chance of seeing the light of day, even at the price of sacrificing an intellectually molding experience. Thus, the moment we wish to place ourselves professionally outside the reach of market forces by retreating from the economic imperatives that determine book publishing nowadays, we let our standards and scholarly practices be determined by those very forces.

Can we collectively devise ways of defending “the book” that also signal our desire not to be dictated to by what publishers think will sell but to be guided instead by the intellectual work

that needs doing in our various fields? One has to agree with Lewis when he summarizes the distorting effect that the current situation has had on our disciplines:

Since the early seventies, graduate students in literature and history have faced increasing pressure to choose their special area and dissertation project on the basis of what they and their mentors know about the constricted job market. More recently this pressure has been compounded by the propensity of university presses, besieged by rising costs and falling markets, to favor books of modest length in modern periods or on broad topics. These forces in the academic book market aggravate the shaping of the disciplines to the advantage of larger fields and cross-disciplinary trends and at the expense of collectively elaborated long-term programs of scholarly inquiry. (1223)

We all know of projects in our respective fields that need to be undertaken, some of which could revise received knowledge, but that nevertheless would not be considered for publication by university presses in the current market-driven, economically strapped publishing environment. A project of this kind can only find its just valorization in its particular field, and there is no better way of legitimating it than having it be vouched for by a group of well-respected scholars in the discipline. We need to find ways to have a manuscript vetted by specialists in its field other than solely through evaluation by university presses.

Again, the appeal of publication subvention is that it upholds “the book” and the intellectual project that book authorship represents; its drawback stems from the coupling of subvention funds with faculty lines, which potentially creates the perception that the promise of those funds influences publication decisions. The solution is to have the award of a subvention itself express the manuscript’s intrinsic worth. Universities could create interdisciplinary committees for the specific purpose of awarding subventions to book manuscripts that have been accepted for

publication by a press. The potential inequity in the subventions available to junior scholars in private institutions as opposed to public ones could be avoided if subventions were awarded competitively instead of being attached to all junior faculty lines as a matter of course. The funding advantage enjoyed by most private institutions would thereby be attenuated. Such committees would need the validation provided by the press's specialist readers. But professional associations for the modern languages and literatures (American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, American Association of Teachers of French, National Council of Teachers of English, etc.) should also consider creating publication endowment funds, as well as committees that competitively award subventions expressly to manuscripts not yet evaluated by a university press. This system would ensure that manuscripts judged important by a panel of specialists in a field (especially a small field) and yet with little chance of being published by a university press had maximum chances of being reviewed for publication. Subventions of this kind, awarded competitively by extradepartmental university committees and by national professional organizations, would have an instantaneous prestige and a probity that would allay any suspicions that the acceptance of a supported manuscript had been mediated by its concession.

One can also envision ways in which the MLA, as the national professional organization for all the modern languages and literatures, might play a role in subvention. Divisional executive committees of the MLA, each composed of five scholars elected by the constituencies of its field, might be tapped in the future to adjudicate on the subvention of scholarly work deemed important to each disciplinary cohort. For example, the MLA could create a publication subvention fund available only to scholars endeavoring to place a first book with a press. Each member of the MLA would contribute a small amount to this fund as part of the yearly dues; the association would also strive to en-

rich this endowment through aggressive fundraising. Each divisional executive committee would recommend a given number of book projects for publication subvention from the MLA. The committee's deliberation process would not differ significantly from the one the various MLA book and article prize committees use each year to determine winners.³

Alternatively, the association could become the electronic repository of manuscripts recommended by divisional executive committees, thereby contributing to the dissemination of research judged significant by some of the best scholars in every field. Indeed, the MLA is already a publishing powerhouse, with a long and impressive list of titles that has increasingly diversified over the last few years. Successful online publishing ventures like the National Academy Press (<http://www.nap.edu/>)—which offers its entire holdings on the Internet free of charge while turning a profit—could be models for this initiative.

Admittedly, the details of such a proposal still need to be articulated. But all the national professional associations related to our fields should carefully examine their presuppositions and operations to determine if they can ameliorate the predicament in scholarly publishing. The line that separates boldness from recklessness is at times hard to draw, but the younger members of our profession are looking to established scholars with increased expectations for concrete action that must not go unfulfilled. The MLA and other professional organizations will secure the steadfast loyalty of their members if they act responsibly—and decisively—in this matter.

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NOTES

¹ One of the first significant salvos in this regard was the publication of "Principles for Emerging Systems of Scholarly Publishing," a report on a meeting sponsored by

the Association of American Universities, the Association of Research Libraries, and the Merrill Advanced Studies Center of the University of Kansas and held in May 2000 "to facilitate discussion among the various academic stakeholders in the scholarly publishing process and to build consensus on a set of principles that could guide the transformation of the scholarly publishing system" (Baker et al.).

² Both documents underscore that conditions are particularly dismal for scholars in the foreign languages and literatures. Greenblatt says, "The situation is difficult for those in English and even more difficult for those in foreign languages." The MLA ad hoc committee reports, in fact, that "[t]he suggestion that scholarly presses are publishing fewer specialized studies appears to be true only in the foreign language fields" (Ryan et al. 172–73). Likewise, an ad hoc subcommittee of the Executive Council of the MLA notes, "Among the MLA's disciplines, this crisis is perhaps most severe in some foreign language departments, but it affects scholarship in literature and language as a whole, especially for those seeking to publish a first book" (Chow et al.).

³ Currently, there are eighty-four divisional executive committees, but the overlapping of periods, genres, etc., in the list would allow that number to be reduced to a manageable size.

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