

Form Follows The Function of the Little Magazine

John Holbo

jholbo@mac.com

www.thevalve.org

[http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/form follows the function of the little magazin1/](http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/form_follows_the_function_of_the_little_magazin1/)

[I've turned some links into footnotes. For full, functional linkage, see the post.]

Welcome to the Valve! (Do you like our name? I know it doesn't exactly set your pants on fire. But nothing that does would wear well. I like the hint of hydrodynamism, plus machine part echo of *Ur-Little Magazine the Dial*.)

Our statement of purpose opens: "The Valve is a literary weblog dedicated to the proposition that the function of the little magazine can follow this form. We mean to foster debate and circulation of ideas in literary studies and contiguous academic areas." Then stuff about how, actually, we'll post about other things; and stuff about not blaming all the authors, or the ALSC, for any crazy thing any one author may haul off and post. In short, common sense. So let me talk about that first bit. But do keep the other bits in mind. It seems appropriate to launch with a substantive post, rather than some piece of persiflage. All the same, this inaugural post is me speaking for myself, not for everyone else.

Yes, it's Holbonically long. I've said a lot of this stuff before, in other ways and places. But I hope this says it better.

My title nods to Trilling, "The function of the Little Magazine", which celebrated *Partisan Review's* 10th birthday. (The essay is conveniently located in your local copy of *The Liberal Imagination*.) When I become an author at Crooked Timber my first post discussed Trilling. He has smart things to say about readership and voice. Let me repeat a few. (I also owe one of our Valve authors, Amardeep Singh, a response to a Trilling post he wrote a few weeks ago; which another of our authors, Daniel Green, has already responded to here. So Trilling is in the air, and we should keep him there. Looks like we're practically the only ones, though.)

Some bracing literary uplift:

From the democratic point of view, we must say that in a true democracy nothing should be done for the people. The writer who defines his audience by its limitations is indulging in the unforgivable arrogance. The writer must define his audience by its abilities, by its perfections, so far as he is gifted to conceive them. He does well, if he cannot see his right audience within immediate reach of his voice, to direct his words to his spiritual ancestors, or to posterity, or even, if need be, to a coterie. The writer serves his *daemon* and his subject. And the democracy that does not know that the *daemon* and the subject must be served is not, in any ideal sense of the word, a democracy at all.

This seems to me the best argument for the great good of blogging: namely, even if everyone else has surrendered to cliché on their blogs, for you, dear friend, the form remains free. You can permalink your soul to the screen in elegant, Montaignean portions. You can conduct an abstruse seminar on a technical point of philosophy. You can bother disproportionately about some old book you like. You can do what no editor would let you, because editors are obliged to be unforgivably arrogant about what the audience won't stand for.

Your voice is your own, if you take responsibility for it. This unimpaired prospect of suiting myself holds back concerns that the sheer volume of blogstuff has gotten appetite suppressing. (See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) for the latest data.)¹ Then there is the worry that compulsively reading 30+ blogs a day has all the hallmarks of mild narcotic addiction. And, yes, the fact that the blogosphere has been colonized by all literary and intellectual vices known to man, and a few invented specially for the occasion.

Trilling speculates in passing that ease of mechanical production is inversely proportional to quality of writing. Sort of an obvious thought, really. Nietzsche remarks (but I can't reach my shelf and am typing too fast to stop) that

good readers only exist where books are scarce; that one of the main virtues of a classical education is not that the texts are necessarily better, but that constrained supply compels reading with the care all books worth reading demand. The classics are not disposable, so one does not get into the bad habit of thinking of them as if they were. (Untimely meditations for the internet age.)

Well, you can be cynical about being a drop in the bucket new blogs. (If there were Talknorati - if we all had RSS feeds in our molars - I'm sure we would discover there is a godless lot of chat in the world. If that makes you feel better about how many blogs there are.) I maintain my enthusiasm because of the thought with which Trilling concludes. Yes, it isn't clear how a 'little magazine' can do anything but be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of alternatives to itself. Still, "we must take into account what would be our moral and political condition if the impulse which such a magazine represents did not exist, the impulse to make sure that the *daemon* and the subject are served." Suppose they held a blogosphere and no one came. That would reflect badly on our species.

Amardeep writes: "Serious writers and thinkers should feel free to take advantage of such an intellectually enlivened - if rarefied - space to work out complex ideas. And if that means a few thousand readers a day rather than a few million, then so be it. The circulation of your magazine (or today, your hitcount) is not everything; if it is, you're probably not doing your best thinking." I quite agree, but he does not add two points (of which I feel sure he is aware.) First, Trilling talks of the exhausting effort just to 'keep the roads open': 10 years of struggle by talented writers to win a circulation of 6,000 for *Partisan Review*. They had it hard. We have it easier, winning that kind of readership.

We are living in a Golden Age of the Little Magazine. (Do you agree?)

Easy for you to say (you say): you write for *Crooked Timber*, so you get the hits. Well, fair enough. And J&B is on target to get it's 500,000th unique in a day or two. We are prouder than we have any right to be, since our success is a function of a healthy literary subculture. We were in the right place at the right time. And look at it this way, traffic-envious friend: even a few hundred readers a week - if a few are the better sort - is a valuable thing. Not to get all 'how much

cyberspace does a man need?' pious-Tolstoyan about it, but the number of readers you need to derive the necessities of focus, companionship, and getting your stuff knocked back with comments, isn't that large. (Yes, if your Will to Power is strong, that won't be enough. Best of luck to you.) We aren't lonely, we modestly successful academic bloggers. Some of the best intellectual conversations I've ever had have come in the form of posts and comments over the past few years. Much higher quality than lots of talks and conferences I've been to. Of course there is a lot of nonsense, but fear of looking like crank hobbyists shouldn't make us falsely modest about the high quality of our best stuff. So say I.

Last but not least, academic blogs have managed the trick of interdisciplinarity and connecting with the public much better than most academics trying to manage the trick of interdisciplinarity and connecting with the public. Turns out the secret is: serve the *daemon*. Then other folks wander in and say, 'hey, can I see the *daemon*?' That's the secret. (Lots of people wander confusedly in looking for much stranger, Boolean *daemons* google said were there. Still.)

Turning this post into heavy-handed, 'best of times, worst of times' sort of production, let me turn from the Golden Age of the Little Magazine to the publishing crisis in the humanities. Dear reader, I have dreams of making the Valve a platform for bold e-publishing ventures; at least for encouraging others in these efforts. For one thing, it turns out I don't know enough about the publishing and editing biz. For another, I might produce the erroneous impression that I think a blog like this IS the magic-bullet solution, which would be silly. I do think that the solution to the problem of poor circulation of ideas (not paper) has to involve making room for something that blogs do well. There has got to be healthier conversation, keeping up the circulation of ideas regarding books and articles. Blogging isn't scholarship, but scholarship may need blogging in quite a strong sense. This will be my conclusion. And another thing: I didn't want my inaugural post to be a negative, shin-kicking affair about how other people are wrong about the publishing crisis. Oh, alright; just a few shins. For the look of the

thing.

Here are some links to online papers and opinion pieces about the crisis in publishing. An MLA-sponsored page: [The Future of Scholarly Publishing](#). An open letter from Stephen Greenblatt. From an ACLS 2003 meeting, brief papers (PDF except the Unsworth) by Carlos J. Alonso, Cathy N. Davidson, John M. Unsworth and Lynne Withey.² Here's a *Believer* article³ - one of the better "MLA is funny" genre pieces - containing a fact-rich formulation of economic fundamentals and cultural dysfunction. (I wouldn't normally turn to *The Believer* for numeric data, but I haven't seen these numbers contradicted anywhere.) The context: slash, slash go the budgets. Expensive science journals hog what remains.

Jennifer Crewe of Columbia University Press presents some numbers, which provide perspective. Average production cost of a university-press title: \$25,000. Total number of copies of each title purchased by all university libraries in bygone days: 1,000. Number of copies of each title sold to all libraries in current crisis days: 200. A book that sells very well (say, 500 copies) might recoup: \$10,000-\$12,000. Average loss on average university-press title: \$10,000+. Cost of subscription to run-of-the-mill scientific journal: \$20,000. It's like a parody of a MasterCard commercial, but all of the "priceless" punch lines are so painfully obvious there's no reason to bother finishing the joke.

The upshot: university presses, once institutions of gentlemanly loss in the service of niche scholarship, have been forced to reorient themselves toward the bottom line. Scholarly criteria—most notably the process of peer review, whereby potential titles are sent out to experts in the field for vetting purposes—have ceded to market criteria. So the whole affair, especially the spending of lavish amounts of money on corporate-funded science journals, underlines the general fear about the steady encroachment of

commercial interests into the sanctum of the university.

And there's a flipside: university presses are simply putting out too many titles. The number of scholarly monographs (book-length treatments of one subject, as opposed to collections or anthologies) in MLA-related fields in the year 2000 was twice what it was in 1989, though by most accounts the achievements of scholarship in that time have probably not doubled. This is where the publishing crisis and the tenure crisis bleed together. Most schools require one book for tenure, which usually means one book within the first five or six years out of grad school—the same years that assistant professors have the biggest teaching loads and the smallest salaries (not to mention that they're often new parents, as Charlie [the subject of the article] is). To fulfill this book requirement, most young professors go one of two routes: they either rewrite their dissertations for publication, or they puff up one substantial journal article with some bibliographical essays and call it a book. But a dissertation is a dissertation and an article is an article and neither is a book, so their publication waters down the whole field and leads right back to the publishing crisis outlined above.

Getting back to those pieces linked above: I wholeheartedly endorse what Unsworth and Withey have to say. I have bones to pick with Alonso, Davidson and Greenblatt. Let me pick them by way of positive convictions.

Humanists - particularly in overcrowded, monograph-ridden literary studies - should embrace e-publishing. No dabble-dabbling skeptical toes to see if the water is just right. 'Let's not be hasty' is not prudence but confusion or status anxiety ('everything the internet touches turns to crackpot'.) Which just needs to be gotten over. Let us hear no false dichotomy arguments to the effect that the book is still valuable. No one is proposing the things are to burn. It is a question of ratios. Electronic-to-paper will tip increasingly steeply in favor of the former. Good. Form should follow function. Academic publishing is supposed to get

rarified stuff out to the few. Books that exist in editions of 200 are, well, rare books. Sprinkling the academic world's libraries with probably non-optimal assortments of (over-priced) rare books is not the best method of pairing these products with the rare readers. PDF or HTML, served up free online, makes more sense. (And searchable. And ready to be marked up and tagged in intelligent ways. Imagine if we had Thinkr, an academic-journalistic version of Flickr. An electronic environment in which academics could compose elegant bibliographic glass bead games, to guide colleagues to the good and warn them off the bad. How delightful! Just a thought.)

Another thing. Don't just engage in point-defense against perceived external/economic threats to the humanities. Let us plan our ideal intellectual world positively, so when we get there we can defend it from the high-ground of its sheer goodness. Before I blueprint utopia, let me give a few examples of tactics I consider unhelpful. Going back to those links above, Alonso considers an MLA Executive Council proposal to establish 'book subventions'; that is, significant funds for first-book publications attached to tenure-track positions. Davidson proposes, more modestly, to stamp out course packs on behalf of better book sales.

I do not want to be unduly harsh. Alonso (and the MLA committee) and Davidson are concerned to improve the state of the humanities. But these proposals, despite being expensive, would do nothing to improve the state of the humanities. Davidson:

Stamp out course paks! University press books are often cheaper than course paks and certain less hassle than all the copyright issues of course paks these days. And it is good for everyone, including the instructor, to read a whole book occasionally.⁴

No. For one thing, books are often not cheaper (and if there are no packs to compete, they are likely to get not cheaper still. Captive markets are not happy markets.) For another, placing artificial restraints on choice of teaching material

can obviously only make quality of education marginally worse. (That 'occasionally' the whole book is better is not a good reason to stamp out the alternative in all cases.)

This is a minor point. The major point is: we should not defend ourselves from external threats by adopting what are, in effect, mild poison pill strategies. (You perceive economic rationalization as a threat. You make the academic book market hard to rationalize by adding yet another layer of irrationality.)

The book subvention proposal seems similarly counter-productive. First, it is very expensive, hence pie-in-the-sky. (Strictly for the ponies.) But the way to see it is unsound is to imagine a maximally generous benefactor underwriting indefinitely large increases in humanities book publishing, plus subsidies for libraries to acquire these fresh torrents (and build annexes in which to channel the inevitable overflow, etc.) The problem, obviously, is that such volume of publication is undesired by readers. It is no good protesting that much good work would find its way onto acid-free paper between sturdy covers this way. Indeed, it would be an astonishing accident if it were otherwise. But it would not be reasonable to expect the good to find its way to readers this way. The consumption of such volumes of stuff is unmanageable.

Here is Nietzsche on the psychological presupposition of exorbitant philological care. None of it makes sense unless "there is no lack of those rare human beings (even if one does not see them) who really know how to use such valuable books - presumably those who write, or could write, books of the same type. I mean that philology presupposes a noble faith - that for the sake of a very few human beings, who always "will come" but are never there, a very large amount of fastidious and even dirty work needs to be done first: all of it is work *in usum Delphinorum* [for future royalty]" (*Gay Science*, §102). Scholarly overproduction is, conversely, a case in which one assumes (even if one does not see them) the eventual appearance of a rare human type, a spiritual termite capable of the fastidious dirty work of masticating masses of indifferent scholarship to extract good bits bashfully tucked away on groaning shelves. *In usum, um, termenum?* [WARNING: Fake Latin. Don't use around real

philologists.]

Last but not least, if it got significantly easier to publish a book, everyone might have to publish two. Not that this is a real risk, but it highlights the unsoundness of 'more money' - quite apart from the likely lack of it - as even a partial kludge to what is really a problem of painful linkage: a professional credentialing procedure driven by the need to settle on occupants for x teaching positions; the process of generating y, an optimal volume of scholarly output. If a large x is generating too large a y, this isn't an economic problem, even if it causes economic problems. It's a cultural problem.

This is obvious. The library is not ideally a disposal site for effluent from the industrial process of manufacturing professional humanists. I don't think Alonso, Davidson and others fail to apprehend the unsavory dynamics of the situation. I am sure they have anticipated my points. But I think they fail to see how truly, deeply, we need to look for a better cultural fix than 'more money to buy more books'.

Let me draw a simple moral. Just because it may be reasonable for scholarly production to disdain economic supply and demand forces, don't let that trick you into disdaining intellectual supply and demand forces. Don't let indifference to healthy intellectual culture mask as principled disdained for the profit motive.

Here's an eloquent take on the cultural problem from Stephen Greenblatt's 2002 MLA Presidential Address (PMLA 118, 3, 2003):

The problem, according to university presses, is that we are not reading one another as much as we once did - or at least that we are not buying one another's books and assigning them to our classes. There are, I know, economic factors here: we are reluctant to buy, let alone compel students to buy, expensive books. But judging from the fate of even modestly priced academic books in our field, the problem is not exclusively economic. Somewhere over the past decade, our interest in one another's work - or, again, at

least in owning one another's work - seems to have declined.

People reflecting on the decline of humanities publishing sometimes say that scholars should write for a larger public. We should, the argument goes, not address other scholars alone but try to reach the mass of nonprofessional readers as well. These readers would buy our books and journals were they written more accessibly and thereby solve the economic problem faced by university presses. Though the task seems to me much more difficult than it is often imagined, I am not averse to trying to reach a larger readership. But I doubt that our specialized scholarly work can be successfully couched in a marketable form for the general reader - assuming such a reader still exists - and I doubt that in most cases we should try to do so. In our profession, as in every profession, there are many things that we should simply address to one another.

Our great failure in recent years is not that we no longer write for a general public - as if every significant literary scholar in the past had been a Lionel Trilling or an Edmund Wilson - but rather that we no longer write for one another, not well enough in any case to inspire one another to buy and assign our books.

Greenblatt concludes with a request for modest subventions, an exhortation to literary scholars to engage with each other and, more immediately, to go forth into the conference hall and buy at least one book off one of those folding tables. I've said I think subventions are not the way. You cannot bribe people into being interested. The other suggestions are hopeless, but rhetorically excusable. (I have exhorted students to go home over the weekend and 'think deep thoughts'. Greenblatt is just finding a nice way to perorate to the effect that he honestly doesn't have the answer.)

So what's the answer? You will have guessed I am now inviting us to step outside the ivory tower to see Greenblatt's skepticism about prospects for

readership laid to rest by the power of blogs. That's too simple. (The power of blogs. Blegh.) But there's something to it. Let's consider how much.

I said above that the malaise Greenblatt indicates (of which low book sales are but a symptom) is cultural, not economic. He agrees. But you could say it's really a problem in population dynamics; or informational infrastructure.

How many members of the MLA? 30,000? That a nation can support a standing army of literary critics is a wondrous fact, and quite explicable with reference to the volume of freshman papers, etc. that must be marked. The number is inexplicable with reference to any critical project. Yes, we need new scholarship (don't bother me with more false dichotomies, please.) The point is: no one has a clear (or even unclear) sense of what work in the humanities presently needs approximately 30,000 hands to complete. I don't mean we should therefore hang our heads in shame, although being a member of a standing army of literary critics must be a semi-comic fate, at least on occasion. But the utter lack of any justification for 30,000 literary critics assiduously beavering away explicating, interpreting, erecting new frameworks, interrogating the boundaries, etc., has consequences. Notably, when a book or article is up for publication and the hurdle is set, 'if it has real scholarly value', we discover this condition is just not as intelligible as we would like, conditions being what they are. It isn't true that literary scholars value the output of 30,000 other literary scholars. They just don't, and that is quite sensible of them, really.

If 'scholarly value' output can't be optimally pegged to some sense of how much will be truly *valued* (since patently the output of 30,000 is going to be on the heavy side), the level will be *de facto* set as some awkward equilibrium point between forces of economic and administrative necessity (budgeting and tenure). But this is no way to run the life of the mind. Neither economic nor administrative considerations should dictate the diameter of the sphere of scholarship. Book and journal editors can't and shouldn't think in these terms. In the end, absent any other hook to hang from, the meaning of the formula 'scholarly value' will tend to be semi-fictionally pegged to a vague collective sense of "a certain quality of conformist excellence within the heuristic constraints of what is considered

appropriate disciplinarity." (That's Tim Burke's phrase, by the by, and I keep quoting it in different contexts because it's great. I don't even remember where he said it. Some comment box.)

Now I honestly don't see any fix for the basic structure. Given the inevitably large scholarly population, given the unavoidable character of the indispensable process of credentialing (I'm not saying I like it; I just don't see how to dispense with it), we are stuck with overproduction, which is the root of the bad things Greenblatt sees. Overproduction means the good gets buried; it means breeding rational distrust of scholarship (hence self-contempt by scholars.) You feed the beast rather than serving the *daemon*.

If overproduction is inevitable, which I grant, the primary question is not how to fund it but how to ameliorate the damage it does us. (Having gone overboard by characterizing excess scholarship as 'effluent' I should probably add: producing things no one wants to read is perfectly harmless so long as these undesired things do not collectively block the road.) The question (I've asked it before)⁵ is how to overproduce with intellectual dignity. (See also, Tim Burke's reply to that post.)⁶

The answer, I think, is that a supplement is needed to a pre-publication peer review process that inevitably hyper-produces hypertrophic 'conformist excellence within the heuristic constraints ...' The supplement should be a hyper-efficient post-publication peer review process that tells you what you might actually want to read.

Consider a simple normative principle. Every scholarly book published in the humanities should be widely read, discussed and reviewed - should have it's own lively blog comment box, not to put too fine a point on it. Because any scholarly book incapable of rousing a modest measure of sustained, considerate, intelligent chat from a few dozen souls who specialize in that area shouldn't have been published as a book - i.e. after several years labor and an average production cost of \$25,000. Turning the point around: any book worth that time and expense, that fails to be widely read, discussed and reviewed - that is not given it's own blog comment box - has been dramatically failed by the academic

culture in which it was so unfortunate as to be born.

The same goes for every issue of every journal. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say it goes for every article, at least in major journals. (Do not bother me with exceptions that prove the rule. Yes, data sometimes needs to be stored against mere potential future use. But this is not the norm in the humanities, and we can usually recognize these odd cases. Yes, misunderstood transformative geniuses will have their transformative geniuses misunderstood by their vision-impaired peers. They will be unjustly ankle-bitten in these comment boxes I would give them. There is no way to fix this problem, except by willfully publishing stuff you actually think is bad, on the grounds that secretly genius stuff will look that way. Which is a bad policy. No, it is the fate of misunderstood geniuses to die for our intellectual sins. I see no other way. They will be born posthumously, as a consolation prize. In the meantime, give them comment boxes in which they will be misunderstood.)

Why is this really quite low normative standard of healthy discussion not presently met? The technological barriers are non-existent, the financial barriers negligible. It's cultural dysfunction. Sheer institutional sclerosis.

The Real Circulation Problem - of which low book sales are a symptom - concerns ideas, not paper. The academic humanities have simply never grown hyper-efficient networks for post-publication peer review that are remotely adequate to the excessive volume of peer-reviewed scholarship generated, especially in just the last few decades. This is the real scholarly argument for moving aggressively online, although it is bolstered by many economic arguments. As I have written before, the beast has poor circulation. The only way to get the blood of ideas moving is to rub its sorry limbs vigorously with ... conversations. Intelligent, bloggy bookchat by scholars, to label this crucial ingredient as the essentially unpretentious thing it is. That isn't scholarship; but - in a world with too much scholarship - may be an indispensable complement to scholarship.

The Plain People of Literary Studies: But if we are doomed to overproduce, aren't

some of our productions doomed to go undiscussed, because they are heuristics of disciplinarity, etc.?

Well, yes. That's sort of the point. Ideally, the fact that something doesn't generate a lively conversation should be taken as a sign that it wasn't very interesting, even though some editor perhaps correctly perceived the dutiful jingles of the bells of heuristic disciplinarity, etc. Ideally, the post-publication volume of online discussion generated by a given book or article ought to be a not completely worthless heuristic of its genuine level of interest to scholars. We are trying to reintroduce a criterion of demand into the system, you see. Not economic demand. Intellectual demand.

The Plain People of Literary Studies: Well, yes, but what about the economic issues? They are real, aren't they?

Yes, and I can't pretend to fully understand them. But the following sounds good to me. The labor that produces scholarship is free - that is, independently paid for. Academic salaries. The cost of no-frills electronic distribution is negligible. And the fancier stuff is often clearly worth the money. Book editing just plain costs, never mind the dead trees. Well, then either academics should become book editors; or else settle for less. See Withey (as linked above):

I am hardly one to downplay the editorial value offered by publishers. But I would like to argue that we need to think carefully about how, and in what circumstances, the editorial value of publishers is most effectively deployed. A colleague of mine, now retired, used to talk about cranking up the machine, by which he meant our long and cumbersome publishing process. This was usually in heated discussions about print runs for proposed books. He would pound his fist on the table and argue that it isn't worth "cranking up the machine" unless we could sell at least 1000 copies

of a book. You can fill in whatever number you like, but my point is simply that, while we might believe that scholarship deserves to reach its audience no matter how small, it doesn't necessarily need to be published by high overhead book publishers in order to reach that audience.

So when is it worth cranking up the machine? I've come to agree with my critics of a few years ago. One of the most important qualities of professional acquisitions editors is their breadth of knowledge, their ability to evaluate potential books not only for their intellectual merit, but also for their potential significance to different audiences - including the author's own discipline, related disciplines, students, and smart people outside the academy. We should let professional editors focus on those kinds of books. Very specialized work, intended for a focused audience largely confined to the author's peers, can just as well be edited on the journals model.⁷

Setting aside the world of books that can sell 1000 copies - by all means, print them - let us aim for a world in which the vast majority of serious academic publishing happens only electronically and essentially for free. Is given away openly and freely. (We bloggers love Creative Commons. Let's spread the gospel. Cathy Davidson finds filling out those copyright forms extremely tedious? Of course she does! Then stamp out the forms, not the course packs.)

This proposal is not just radical but will be extremely disagreeable to many scholars because it will seem to index a shabby downgrading of their status. Whereas once they could expect to be hardbound, now they are reduced to high quality, nicely typeset PDF and a permalink all their own. Well, I'm sorry, it's just a more sensible way to overproduce. Anyway, any sane scholar will trade acid-free paper for better hope of actual readers. Also, for more freedom. I hope to talk about all this at greater length some other time, but I think the bargain

academics should try to strike is the opposite of 'give us more money and will give you more of the same.' It should be: 'you are presently paying us to produce work, which is then given to others who sell it back to you at great cost, but without granting you the right to give it to your clients - that is, your students. If you could just pay once, and then have all this material freely available to give to students (who gripe about fees and costs) and the public (who ask you what we are good for) would that be enough for you to give us the freedom to try some innovative models for publication and promotion and so forth? Will you free us to save you money and make students and the public happy? Have we got a deal?'

I am not so naive (but I'm almost so naive) to miss the fact I am skating over huge difficulties and obstacles and snags. 'Perfectly free' is a target we won't hit for a thousand reasons. But we ought to aim for it anyway. It is not our first instinct as academics: do it on a shoestring. We feel penny-pinching insinuations as thin edges of wedges, threatening the lofty ideals of academia with the logic of the market. Perhaps we should cultivate a contrary instinct in this instance. Perhaps for once the logic of the market can buy us a measure of genuine intellectual freedom that we presently do not enjoy. (I'm not sure enough about this to do more than throw it out as a provocation to discussion.)

The Plain People of Literary Studies: So are you saying that, not only should I maybe not have to write that book for tenure? I should bribe my dean with budget savings so I can get tenure for blogging?

Ah, now we see the awkwardness inherent in my system. See above. Blogging not scholarship. I don't want to end up on an absurd hook, tenuring people for blogging. (Not unless blogging starts to look significantly different than it does now.)

Let me make a couple points. I am agnostic about monographs vs. several articles (but would be as happy as the next person to see a handsome hardback edition of my thoughts, if anyone will have me.) I don't think humanistic journal culture is healthier than humanistic book culture, so shifting to the former won't

improve health (though it might save money and shelf space, which is at least something.) In both cases, intellectual circulation is seriously down. What we need is to get circulation up by rewarding people for getting circulation up. Book subventions won't do because we want ideas not paper. We need to reward functional organs of mediation. Better: functional organs of intelligent enthusiasm. (Obviously I am patting our new Valve on the back. We hope it works very well.) Can't judge a book by its cover + too many books = you need someone to endow that book, that data, with a happy halo of metadata. It needs to be festooned with datastreams of bookchat. (And better than chat, we hope, but at least with chat.) Old fashioned paper review journals are themselves too much a part of the problem to become part of the solution. Blogs (and other functional online organs) are much more nimbly engineered for this sort of utterly necessary work.

If you need work done, you ought to reward the work to make sure it gets done. Stands to reason. So let there be publication credit and ... mediation credit. For tenure. And by all means insist on a goodly amount of the former. But do credit the latter.

The Plain People of Literary Studies: But aren't blogs just too ... colloquial and informal and (well, vulgar) to count?

I'm so glad you asked that question. First, it makes no more sense to devalue informality unless you consistently maintain it is gauche to speak to your colleagues in the hall about your work, ask off-the-cuff questions in seminars, attend informal talks where the speaker does not just mechanically read the prepared paper. We would be mad to enforce silence at all stages except the stage when your book finally falls stillborn from the press.

The Plain People of Literary Studies: But we don't tenure people for chatting up their colleagues in the hall.

Fair enough. Put it this way (I am so glad Henry Farrell just wrote this post,⁸ more or less making the point I am about to make, from a novel angle): there is considerable positive value to bloggy informality as a counterweight to the academically formal simulation of function under pressure to overproduce. Informal follows function, perhaps. Back to Burke and the 14 karat gold-plated standard of 'scholarly value.'

"A certain quality of conformist excellence within the heuristic constraints of what is considered appropriate disciplinarity."

In short: disservice to the daemon. Simpler still: dissing the daemon. Disrespect for the point. Losing track of the reason why. Writing things that do not exist to be read or inspire interest - the ultimate expression of arrogance towards your audience, if you had one. (Not you, dear friend. All those others.) Blogging does not have this problem of habitual decline into empty mimicry of authentic intellectual purposiveness. This is a bit reason why blogs get read. This is why academic work goes unread, even by our peers. Informal discussion of academic work is often higher quality than formal discussion because it makes disservice to the daemon undisguisable. Rubbing this off on academic work is not venial sin, as you might think, but cardinal virtue.

Of course blogging has every other problem under the sun. It is glib and superficial and, when challenged, too often devolves into third-rate stand-up comedy or name-calling. It is cliché-ridden, fatuously triumphalists, a clamorously thumped tub of collective ignorance. (Not you, my friend. All those others.) But connecting it up to scholarship can correct for a lot of this. Rub some intellectual polish onto the rough medium. Do the public intellectual thing. Or mind your scholarly knitting. Start a blog only 12 experts on some arcane text. The form permits.

In sum, blogging gives its informal, infectious enthusiasm - its gleeful daemon-servicing - to scholarship. Scholarship imparts its intellectual discipline to blogging. A happy union, can't you see?

The Plain People of Literary Studies: You know, you haven't said a word about all the substantive disputes within literary studies. Culture wars, canon wars, Theory vs. traditional humanism, politics and race and gender and all the rest. Ideology vs. aesthetics. 'Difficulty'. Cultural studies versus literary purism. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* vs. *Bleak House*.

Haven't I stepped on enough toes without wading into that? Certainly I have opinions. I will bend your ear soon enough. But I hope what I am proposing is, to a considerable degree, neutral with regard to all this. At any rate, I have done my best to explain the merits of my proposal independently.

The Plain People of Literary Studies: Except you like Trilling.

Yes, I'm one of those liberals.

¹ <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000298.html>

² <http://www.acls.org/ex-03am.htm>

³ http://www.believermag.com/issues/july_2004/lewiskraus.php

⁴ <http://www.acls.org/03am/davidson.pdf>

⁵ http://examinedlife.typepad.com/johnbelle/2005/01/clueless_in_aca_1.html

⁶ <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/tburke1/perma11305.html>

⁷ <http://www.acls.org/03am/withey.pdf>

⁸ <http://crookedtimber.org/2005/03/29/profanum-vulgus/>