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## AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE CURRENT RESEARCH MODEL OF LITERATURE

THE state university traditionally serves to preserve and encourage learning in the many fields of intellectual endeavor into which it divides our culture's knowledge, and in return for support by taxpayers it contributes to the intellectual, technological, and economic welfare of our society. In the humanities, ideally, it is the home of the intelligentsia, who enjoy unscheduled time to think and write in exchange for teaching. Charged with the selection and maintenance of the best faculty whom the state can afford, and whom the taxpayers expect to be their intellectual leaders, the university recruits those deemed most capable of fulfilling its mission, encourages productivity within the institution, and then proves its faculty's accomplishment to the public. Its business is knowledge that benefits the culture, and we literary scholars have a part to play.

But do our discipline's current practices of seeking and preserving knowledge lead us into areas of real interest to our culture? Does the model governing our research and scholarship promote the hard thinking about a wide range of human concerns that historically has been the task of the humanist? The model we work within defines our cultural contribution by our productivity and then defines our productivity by our rate of publication, the effect of which is to encourage specialization. Does specialization promote the development of ideas valuable to the society that supports us, that gives us the time to think in hopes the investment will be culturally profitable? Perhaps we should examine our activities to see what expectations motivate them, what assumptions support them, and what results we can expect from them.

With its expectation of specialization, continuous publication, external evaluation of research, and participation in conferences, our research and scholarship model closely resembles the model followed by the sciences. We engage in these practices to demonstrate our research capabilities in a period of intense competition for university positions that require research, and to provide the visibility our universities desire in their competition with one another. The model is difficult for us to avoid, because it supplies a convenient, apparently objective set of criteria for us to use in matters of evaluation and promotion. But we are not scientists, and we may not be doing our best thinking when we specialize.

Doing research to advance knowledge in a narrow field seems appropriate to science: the frontiers of knowledge are so remote from the ground shared by scientists within a discipline that many must specialize to gather the data that a few later synthesize. Scientific specialization thus leads to knowledge whose value can be calculated by its

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contribution either to our technological advancement or to our understanding of the cosmos and of our biological state.

But the concentration on narrow literary topics seems to lead away from knowledge that is valuable to our culture or to our students, as it leads away from the development of broad synthesizing ideas. The objects of the two inquiries differ: scientists study phenomenological events, and literary scholars study structures of words, words put together by writers who belong to different societies and who are interested in expressing artfully their feelings about human reality. The texts that we teach and analyze are valuable to us because they show us how we think and how we have thought. If we are to convince our society of their value, we must address the questions of why we believe our enterprise worthwhile.

Yet to spend time thinking about this question is to take time away from activities that help our careers. Our discovery that we must publish early and regularly to demonstrate our research talents forces us to limit our field of inquiry, and whatever success we may have does not always give us the confidence to expand our horizons later. So we do the best we can: we shape our professional development according to the scientific model because we want to contribute intellectually to our culture, and this model governs our possibilities.

In narrowing our focus, however, we isolate ourselves from the culture that supports us, that expects us as humanists to use our time and intelligence to contemplate a wide range of human artistic and conceptual activity. We isolate ourselves even from one another when we no longer discuss common interests. Of course we cannot write only books with broad synthesizing ideas, and when we do write such books, we recognize the value of specialized studies. But whatever our work, we should ask ourselves what relation it has to our discipline's and our culture's central concerns in order to avoid spending our lifetimes only proving our industriousness.

We are caught in the double bind of having to produce scholarship on a regular schedule, since we are accountable for our research time to our institutions, which

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1-1530

are themselves accountable to taxpayers, and finding that schedule inappropriate for developing ideas valuable to our culture and our taxpayers. The problem is that all parties are doing their best. The taxpayers want to support an institution of higher learning that will produce good ideas, not only in science but also in the humanities; the university wants to justify taxpayers' support by having a faculty that is productive and that is in fact better (more productive) than the faculties of other universities; faculty prove their productivity by publication. Faculty improvement becomes equated with greater (more) publication.

The acceptance of the scientific model has affected our professional activities as well. At academic conferences most of us assume that by reading twenty-minute papers to one another we are exchanging scholarly information, critical views, and ideas. In medicine such conferences help practicing physicians and medical researchers learn new treatments for disease, and in other scientific disciplines they allow for the exchange of new knowledge. But participation in conferences seems less worthwhile in literary studies, perhaps in part because we are not often concerned with new discoveries that must be communicated immediately. We are, or should be, more concerned with ideas, ideas that can usually be expressed more cogently in writing than in speech. Most literary scholars find the twenty-minute oral format inadequate for elaborating an idea of interest to a diverse audience, and so we narrow our focus, sometimes to one aspect of a single literary work, in order to be able to say something new, and then we limit our audience to those who may have read the work. Thus specialization and the practice of giving papers at conventions support each other. And taxes support both.

Specialization also gives rise to specialized journals, many of which obtain their articles most from the untenured, who in turn depend on the journals to provide them with the requisite publication. The result of our model's expectation of specialization, measurable productivity, and publication is the proliferation of short articles, many originally designed as talks, on limited questions. Who reads these articles? Who has time even to read all the articles in one's field—unless one defines one's field very narrowly?

And does the activity of writing short research reports use up time that we would better employ in hard thinking? Or in teaching? Here we come to the taxpayers' other expectation of a state university: good teaching. We have long been trying to decide what good teaching is. Many of our state universities have attempted to encourage good teaching through awards and salary increases, on the assumption that such incentives will make us try harder—as if we would make little effort otherwise to do well in the classroom. Again, all parties are doing their best: the administration recognizes its obligation to provide good teaching, so it establishes methods for faculty evaluation and prizes for the outstanding;

0621-2

we faculty facing student questionnaires recognize the necessity to make the classroom an enjoyable place and order our courses accordingly.

Yet in the long run, we are probably improving students' education very little by our systems of evaluation and reward, for most of us would like to teach well anyway. What we must do, I believe, is to address the question of what we are teaching, rather than how we are teaching, and if we can diminish the distance between what we write about and what we teach, we can bring to the classroom the knowledge we acquire in our research. But we must escape the model that now shapes our thinking, that separates our class preparation from our scholarly pursuits. If our pursuit of knowledge and our preparation for our advanced courses were to have the same goal, that of knowledge of some broad field, we could proceed with enthusiasm in both endeavors, and we would benefit by enjoying even our undergraduate survey courses. In an ideal situation, our curiosity, intelligence, and desire to know more and to communicate what we know—all of which the university seeks in a faculty—would lead us toward making a valuable intellectual contribution to our culture, in both our research and our teaching.

These, then, are the problems we literary scholars have with our model. Taxpayers want a good university with good faculty doing good teaching. University administrators identify good faculty by productivity and reward productivity and good teaching monetarily. We strive to be productive by limiting our field of inquiry so that we can write something new fairly frequently, and we strive to be good teachers by making our classes exciting, even though we may not thereby profit professionally. Yet when we attempt to prove our worth to our culture by exhibiting our research, we sometimes experience the gnawing fear that we have not contributed very much. We have done our best, and we have had little time to think.

What can we do to give ourselves more time to think? What can we do to make a worthwhile contribution to our culture? We would probably agree that a university's goal should be to establish an excellent faculty capable of providing a good education for students, and we would probably agree that the faculty owe intellectual leadership to our culture. We may disagree about the techniques for achieving this ideal.

A major responsibility of the tenured faculty in a research university (and not all state institutions of higher learning should be research universities) is to represent our society in selecting scholars our taxpayers will support to do research. Through the promotion procedure a university redistributes talent throughout our colleges and universities by offering some scholars permanent positions to do research in addition to teaching and by releasing others who may not finally be interested in or capable of doing the research the university desires to devote themselves to full-time teaching or to other

P-1500  
0621-3

activities. In a perfect world, the university discovers the future hard thinkers of the country in this way. For the model presently operating in literature departments, however, hard thinking is evidenced by published research, and thus we channel our thinking into areas in which we can publish.

I would suggest we begin our escape from this model by examining our promotion procedures. The AAUP tenure guidelines suggest that we choose whether to give an assistant professor tenure within seven years of first employment at a university, and we usually decide earlier to allow adequate time for notification of dismissal if that should be necessary. Since our goal is generally to acquire productive scholars for our permanent faculty, we evaluate the candidate's productivity, assuming that early productivity is predictive of a scholar's lifetime rate.

To avoid possible discrimination, conscious or unconscious, we set up systems whereby we often evaluate a candidate's scholarly ability only on "objective" evidence, such as publication of articles, books, and book reviews; participation in conferences; evaluation of the candidate's research by outside scholars in the same field; and finally evaluations by committees with some members from other departments. Our presupposition is that evaluation exclusively within the department would be "subjective" and perhaps unfair.

The criteria of objectivity and publication are mutually supportive, as the government pressure on us to be nondiscriminatory makes us seek concrete evidence of a candidate's academic success, and our profession has accepted publication as evidence of a candidate's qualifications for the position. In our honest efforts to be nondiscriminatory we hesitate to make even the discriminations (in the original meaning of the word—"distinctions") we once made judging some research projects better written or broader in scope, or more imaginative than others. We dislike even more to make distinctions that might result in our selecting a candidate who has published little over a candidate who has published much. To make these discriminations, we would have to do our own thinking, our own evaluating, and since our courts tend to settle discrimination suits by considering a plaintiff's concrete qualifications, we shy away from this responsibility.

If, however, we were to agree throughout our profession that what we want in a faculty of literary scholars is not a steady rate of publication, which we call productivity, but rather a thoughtful contribution to our discipline's intellectual life, even if that contribution did not manifest itself in great numbers of printed pages, then we would relinquish our (illusory) goal of objectivity in evaluation. We would make our tenure and promotion decisions in an admittedly subjective manner, that is, according to our best estimate of the quality of candidates' minds—as we may judge from their teaching and writing (in whatever quantity that might be)—and according to our expectations of their future intellec-

tual contributions to our discipline. This "quality of mind" would reveal itself in written works: in topics under study, in the originality and importance of arguments, in mastery of ideas and information, in maturity of methods of research, in breadth of knowledge, and in clarity of style. It would reveal itself in candidates' teaching: in the ability to articulate general problems orally, to engage a class in interesting discussions of literary questions and wide-ranging ideas, to relate literary texts to one another and to other texts and events in history, and to grade fairly. All these qualities we should be able to judge in our colleagues.

Such a reorientation would entail shifting the bulk of the responsibility for judgment toward those best acquainted with the candidate's work within his or her university. We would not solicit evaluations from the candidate's colleagues outside the university; often nominated by the candidate for the request, they would be unlikely to offer anything but praise for a scholar (friend) with the same specialty. The practice is appropriate to the sciences, for in these disciplines the validity of research needs to be verified by specialists, and the scientists within a candidate's department may not be able to make a proper evaluation; but it is inappropriate to the humanities because a candidate's departmental colleagues should be able to judge his or her work. I would argue that if a literary scholar's research is so specialized that departmental colleagues cannot understand it, then perhaps it is not of great importance to literary studies. (Of course there are exceptions, yet in those the candidates should be able to explain their ideas to their colleagues.)

In accordance with our desire to do the evaluating ourselves, we should announce that the publication of articles or books does not guarantee a candidate's promotion. Such a guarantee only gives the editors of journals and publishing houses a vote in our promotion process. Instead we should conscientiously read the candidate's published and unpublished work (perhaps appointing subcommittees composed of those closest to the candidate's field) to determine if the quality of mind represented there is what the university wants for its permanent faculty, and we should present our conclusions in writing. We are the ones who know what kind of faculty we want for our university, and we ourselves should make those difficult personnel decisions.

If we were to request statements from candidates describing their research, their goals, the relation of their talks, articles, and books to one another and to any long-range projects, the importance of seemingly overspecialized or technical research, we would eliminate the danger of misunderstanding or mistakenly dismissing candidates' projects, and we could better predict their future contributions to our culture. This kind of evidence of a candidate's quality of mind would give information not only to those involved in making tenure decisions but also to those in other specialized fields.

8-15-80

If we all changed our promotion procedures in this way, we would gradually change the model of our whole enterprise. We would no longer encourage young assistant professors to seek rapid publication and early visibility by specializing in esoteric fields because we would judge them on their ability to take on big questions, to broaden their knowledge, and to begin long-term projects that could be important to us all. In selecting our tenured faculty by these criteria, we would direct our discipline's thinking toward our culture's major concerns, toward issues that perhaps are not strictly literary but rather interdisciplinary or even political.

One consequence of this action will be a reduction in the number of highly specialized journals and small conferences supported now primarily by assistant professors struggling to say something. Another consequence may be the establishment of more journals and conferences appealing to the intelligentsia of many disciplines: interdisciplinary journals in which we literary scholars may speak not only to one another but also to intelligent people throughout our culture, and interdisciplinary conferences that will acquaint us with thinkers in fields other than our own. Many of us admit now that the primary value of academic meetings is getting together with other academics rather than listening to twenty-minute talks. By removing the pressure on the untenured to give these talks, we would

0621-4

probably reduce the number of regional conferences modeled on the MLA meetings and develop more topic-oriented symposia established for thinkers in a variety of fields to meet for thoughtful exploration of difficult questions.

Finally, when we tell our younger, untenured colleagues that we evaluate their quality of mind in our examinations of their teaching and research, we shall free them to do the most important work they can, and eventually we shall develop a body of scholars who write less (but write for the benefit of all) and contribute more to our culture.

Through this small change in promotion procedures, we indirectly reorient our whole discipline away from specialization and toward a new kind of informed general (literary) studies. When we find encouragement from one another and from our administrators to become our culture's intellectual leaders by learning, teaching, and writing about broad philosophical issues, literary movements, ideologies, major figures and influences, and the relation of literature to other discourses in a particular period of our culture, then we shall probably enjoy our teaching and our research much more than we do now. And when we find that we have something to say to one another and to the culture that supports us, then we shall have the time to write well about things that matter.

### New York University Certificate in Translation

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Students should have earned a degree in the foreign language of concentration or completed advanced study in that language. However, special consideration is given to applicants with foreign residence or related work experience. Specific preparation in subject-matter areas—economics, business, and banking as well as scientific or technical fields—is often essential. The student may enter the sequence in any semester including the summer.

For further information write or call John C. Miller, Director, Foreign Language Program, NYU, SCE, 2 University Place, Room 56, New York, NY 10003; tel. 212 598-3346.

### National Humanities Center Fellowships, 1985-86

*Purpose and eligibility.* The National Humanities Center supports advanced study in history, philosophy, literature, and other fields of the humanities. Its fellows, including both senior scholars and young scholars several years beyond the doctorate, pursue research and writing in residence at the center.

*Number and duration of fellowships.* The center admits twenty-five to forty fellows annually. Most fellowships are for the academic year, September-May, though a few are available for the fall or spring semester.

*Stipends.* The amount of fellowship stipend is based on a scholar's usual academic salary. Many fellows have partial funding in the form of sabbatical salaries or grants from other sources and receive from the center the difference between that funding and their usual salaries. All fellows are given travel expenses to and from the center for themselves and their families.

*Deadline.* 15 Oct. 1984 (Note change of application deadline from previous years.) For information and application material write Kent Mullikin, Assistant Director, National Humanities Center, 7 Alexander Drive, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709.