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WHAT HAS ENGLISH WROUGHT

The Corporate University's Fast Food Discipline

As I sit at my computer thinking about the future of higher education, I have before me the final version of a collaborative document with its stunned, startled gaze fixed on the past. It is the Modern Language Association's report from its Committee on Professional Employment, issued in December 1996. The report, which is the product of a series of discussion sessions, was assembled and drafted by Sandra Gilbert with assistance from her fellow committee members. The astonished gaze its collective author casts on recent history suggests the windswept visage of a profession no longer in control of its fate. Eyes bulging, the figure is nearly swept away by forces it cannot comprehend. In stark terror at their oncoming fury, it dares not turn to glimpse their destination.

The report gives us a reasonable — if economically and contextually impoverished — account of the recent history of the academic job market in the humanities. Its opening subheading, as one reader pointed out to me, introduces a passage in the text that refers to "the best of times at large contrasted eerily with the worst of times in academia." Of course the millions of underemployed or unemployed Americans, all those working at poverty or near poverty-level wages, are not living in the best of times. We are not alone and as long as our disciplinary understanding of the national and global economy foregrounds us as exceptional victims the chances for meaningful solidarity, meaningful alliances, and significant change remain slim. But at least we are now symbolically committed to recognizing that our own house is in disrepair. Having argued for a time that jobless Ph.Ds were primarily ungrateful, its principal author now more or less announces "I feel your pain." The proposals for action she and the others put forward in the final section of the report are unfortunately less generous. Yet after more than a quarter century of denial, with this report English and the other literature and language professions have now condescended to admit that there is a problem.

I would like to review some of the report's strengths and weaknesses and in the process use it as an occasion to describe the wider implications of the history we have hidden from ourselves for decades. I will argue that English as a discipline bears a special responsibility for making the precipitous decline of higher education more likely in the coming decades. That is partly because English departments have made the college teacher what standard economic theory calls an *elastic commodity*, one for which there are any number of substitutes. At the end of the paper I will make some predictions about where we are heading, based on the mounting corporatization of higher education and on the increasing assaults on both tenure and academic freedom.

But I must first digress briefly, because I need to acknowledge my own positioning and odd relation to this

committee. I have been writing about the profession for several years and have sharply criticized the MLA and the series of its presidents who were the center of power on the committee. In fact the report's account of recent history depends in part on uncredited arguments borrowed from two partly, but not entirely, overlapping groups of scholars — those who have written on the political and economic status of the profession and those who have addressed the job crisis. One might have wished that some of the groundbreaking essays the American Association of University Professors has published in *Academe* and *Footnotes* over the years were cited here. One might have wished the work several of us have done on the job crisis was acknowledged. So much for standards of scholarship. I suppose that a score or so of us might make the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by filing a class action plagiarism suit against the committee members and their sponsoring organization.¹

Meanwhile we are treated instead to the report's unlikely yoking of Association of Departments of English head David Laurence and Harvard University Professor John Guillory as disciplinary seers. This comical — and imaginary — pairing links the MLA's most apoplectic staffer with one of the profession's most admired new apologists for business as usual. Up until 1995 Laurence could be encountered at MLA meetings heatedly insisting there was no job crisis; if there were one, he would add, it was wrong to speak of it, since that would discourage people from signing up for graduate study. Guillory's role has been more recent, first with his effort to infantilize graduate students by decrying their premature professionalization, then with his condescending regret at their increasing politicization. Their politicization and organized action is actually the only thing that might save the profession, and Guillory's effort to subvert it is part and parcel of the MLA leadership's steady attempts to undermine the Graduate Student Caucus and resist its initiatives.²

So it is more than a little ironic to have the CPE report hailing them as the profession's prophets. "Thanks to Laurence and Guillory," or "as Laurence and Guillory have shown us with their typical trenchant insightfulness" or "Laurence and Guillory again point the way" is the approximate effect of Gilbert's repeated citation of their fortuitous faux collaboration. These Bobsy Twins haven't so far as I know coauthored anything, so presumably it's their enlightening conversation Gilbert has in mind. All this is hardly the most critical issue, but it seems worth going on the record about these elements of a document written in part in ignorance and bad faith.

On the positive side, however, the MLA has now effectively removed its imprimatur from its official posture of denial. And in one critical area the report recommends genuine action. It takes up the suggestion I have been making for several years — that the association investigate unfair hiring practices by individual departments — and urges approval. Of course this recommendation will have to survive extensive review, but it could have real deterrence value if implemented effectively. But the report for the most part decorously avoids advocating the kind of activism we need and makes it clear the MLA will do little more to highlight or criticize the educational practices of departments and institutions.

The MLA's importance in this area should not be underestimated. As the largest of our disciplinary organizations it has considerable leadership potential. It also has a deep structural responsibility for the present conditions of academic labor, as the professional organization representing the single largest disciplinary group of graduate student and part time labor. So at issue here is not only the inadequacy of the CPE report but also the discipline's special culpability. Yet if I have been critical of the organization's reluctance to act politically I must also say it has perhaps been the single most activist large disciplinary organization. Most of the others are even more frightened of the public sphere, more unwilling to undermine faculty privileges and departmental autonomy. Thus the MLA has been one of few such groups to defend NEH funding on Capitol Hill consistently and aggressively. One would think all humanities fields would have been in that battle for years, but such is not the case. The MLA also cosponsored an important conference on part time labor initiated by the American Historical Association in 1997, working closely with the American Association of University Professors, a group more experienced in articulating

basic statements of principle, and the work of that conference should have major impact. Just by issuing its own report on the job crisis and by collaborating on the part-time employment report, the MLA this year has put itself ahead of most disciplinary groups. But the hour is late, much more needs to be done, and more than two decades of inaction will cost us very dearly indeed.

One relatively minor but telling example of an area where we need tough action is in the MLA's response to efforts to create new Ph.D programs. Although many faculty members find it difficult to believe that institutions would attempt to establish new doctoral programs in the midst of the current oversupply of Ph.Ds — because creating new programs is much like throwing gasoline on an uncontrolled fire — there are always several such efforts under way. Often the pressure comes from above, from administrators who want to move up the hierarchy of rankings by institutional type, sometimes because that produces more state support. A number of doctoral programs were forced on faculty members at Michigan universities for that reason in the last decade. Sometimes departmental faculty resist these efforts but are overwhelmed by coldly unscrupulous administrators. Professional organizations like the MLA should be leading the way to block new doctoral programs, and they should be doing so simultaneously on multiple fronts. Working on the supply of new Ph.Ds this way will not solve all our problems, but it is one necessary component of a comprehensive approach to the job crisis and can somewhat increase the employment prospect of the many underemployed Ph.Ds now seeking meaningful careers.

One reason we cannot simply attack the problem of supply is that our economic situation is far more complicated than that. Indeed, Marc Bousquet, former head of the MLA's Graduate Student Caucus, recently suggested to me that there really is no job market in English, and I agree. My own reasons follow:

- 1) Supply and demand are so thoroughly out of sync with one another that the product being marketed — the new Ph.D — has become almost valueless.
- 2) Supply and demand in the higher education job system are not a function of need — or even dynamically interdependent — but are rather each independent variables shaped by quite different social and political forces.
- 3) The forces shaping supply and demand for new Ph.Ds are not exclusively or even necessarily primarily economic but rather cultural and institutional.
- 4) Supply has been artificially increased and demand artificially depressed. This is not a simple economic relationship, though new Ph.Ds are suffering the classic economic consequences of dramatic oversupply.

Let's say, for example, that the country actually wanted to guarantee that all college students could read texts critically and write well on their own. Many of us have some idea of how much close attention and tutoring we would need to achieve that standard. We'd need a hell of a lot more English professors than we have now if we actually wanted to do so. The same holds for math professors, science professors, and foreign language teachers. If we wanted undergraduates to be knowledgeable about art or music, well, once again, demand might match supply. Yet if the need exists to hire large numbers of faculty, the cultural and political will to pay their salaries is nowhere to be found.

THE UNDERPRODUCTION OF JOBS

Ph.Ds are produced in large numbers meanwhile, not because of a massive demand for new faculty but because of an institutional demand for cheap graduate student labor and because of faculty desire to maintain the perks and pleasures of graduate education. It's basically a pyramid scheme, most dramatically not only at the Ph.D level but also for the MFA in fields like creative writing.

Bousquet and other members of the GSC would argue that there is thus really a *job system*, not a job market. Certainly they are right that there is no independent market for full-time academic employees registering supply and demand. Rather the job system we have is an interlocking structure of employment patterns, job definitions, salary constraints, hierarchized reward systems, training programs, institutional classifications, economic struggles, ideological mystifications, differential allotments of prestige, and social or political forces. Together, all these mechanisms produce an artificially restricted number of full-time jobs for Ph.D holders. Graduate students or adjunct faculty employed to teach introductory courses at brutally exploitive wages are part of that job system; so are the dwindling percentage of tenure-track faculty. They are all part of one system that severely limits the number of decent jobs for new Ph.Ds.

As a first step, then, we need to visualize new full-time tenure-track jobs as one slice of a single employment pie in higher education. Such a pie graph may help us realize that the system of employment is relational and interdependent. But the whole job system has many other components as well. The mystification of humanities teaching that makes it seem just and reasonable for English professors to teach four times as many courses as microbiology professors is part of the system. All the elements of the system work together to regulate and normalize it. New jobs are not independent functions of the number of students we need to teach or the courses we are expected to offer. If the market for full-time positions flowed directly from those needs all our recent PhDs would have jobs. So the MLA job list is a highly manipulated and contingent phenomenon. It is a small, overdetermined segment of the job system.

Economic or cultural investment or disinvestment in one part of the system affects other parts either immediately or over time. Both the responsibilities individuals have and the benefits they receive are functions of this system. Even rewards for unique achievement are made possible and justified by it. That means we are all responsible, that our different status positions are interdependent. But many elements of this system are subject to change.

So it's not simply "the economy" that has given us a job crisis, as if the economy were our inexorable and monolithic fate; it's a host of social, political, and cultural forces, values, and constituencies that *can be acted upon*, that can be influenced and modified. And the faculty members who tell us otherwise — who spread disinformation out of their own naive ignorance and self-love — are culpable. Just as the faculty members who believe they bear no responsibility for institutional practices are culpable. Just as the faculty members who believe their sense of entitlement flows from nature not from differential forms of exploitation are culpable. Failing to acknowledge individual responsibility or to credit the potential for collective agency are just two ways the CPE report fails to view the crisis broadly enough. Both its narrow view of the forces acting on higher education and its recommendations for change have already been overtaken by events. What, then, has the committee failed to understand?

One succinct way of highlighting the problem is to point out a basic contradiction in the group's recommendations. Put bluntly, they cannot recognize the tension between their realism and their elitism. The report repeatedly urges us to prepare graduate students to teach in the real world, to prepare them for the jobs and responsibilities that will exist in the new millennium. "An offer from a two-year institution or a high school should not," the report remonstrates, "elicit the response (as it recently did from a prominent academic), 'Oh, well, it'll put food on the table while you're looking for a job'." Indeed, "the primary goal of graduate education should not be to replicate graduate faculty." Departments "will have to reimagine the size and shape of the graduate programs they offer and the directions in which those programs ought to evolve, given the range of educational needs our profession will have to meet in the twenty-first century." Part of the accompanying rhetoric is simply ignorant, as when they quote George Levine warning that "graduate programs will have to find ways to incorporate into their training 'the sorts of material that would serve students finding jobs at heavy teaching colleges'." Here in River City, as in many other rural spots, we already do that; indeed we've been doing it for decades. Our graduate students not only teach a whole range of lower-level composition, literature, and film courses; they also teach remedial rhetoric and

composition for disadvantaged students. Indeed, they train at intensively tutoring remedial students. Short of practicing community college groundskeeping or high school lunch room monitoring it's not immediately clear what more our students should do to prepare themselves for the service jobs of the future. Certainly not all of them have set their dreams on the research track; some end up sick of their dissertations and hope never to see another major research project. Those who invest themselves in remedial tutoring seem to do it with great dedication; they believe the work matters and they are skilled at it. Whether any community colleges will be willing to pay for this kind of individual attention is the real issue, not whether our graduate students are qualified and interested in doing the work.

Where the real contradiction in the CPE report arises, however, is between its purportedly bracing dose of realism about jobs in the new millennium and its recommendation about graduate student teaching loads. The committee goes on to urge that graduate student employees teach only one course per semester. What the stern warning about preparing for the jobs that will exist means, quite simply, is hurry and set up what far too many faculty at elite institutions secretly think of as *the Rhet/Comp Droid assembly lines*. These dedicated "droids," so many literature faculty imagine, will fix comma splices, not spaceship wiring. But why give Rhet/Comp Droids extra leisure time? What are they going to do with time off? They beep and whir and grade, that's all. They're not training for research.

My own department offers teaching at two courses per semester and virtually every graduate student signs up for it. They need the money for living expenses. For years I have urged my department to reduce the teaching load but retain the full salary. I want our students to have more time for their intellectual lives. But the JOBS OF THE FUTURE so confidently touted by the MLA will not have a major intellectual component, not any substantial intellectual component, let alone research time. That's not because they will be comp jobs, however, but rather because the instructors will be so underpaid and so overworked that they will have little time for reflection. So there's no reason to provide graduate students facing that sort of future with anything but job training and little reason not to extract the maximum labor from them while they're at it. Indeed extracting the maximum labor at the lowest cost has been the aim of graduate training in English for decades.

ALTERNATIVE CAREERS ARE FOR OTHER PEOPLE

Because I have the research-oriented Ph.D in mind, my own politicking to lower the teaching loads of graduate employees has the aim of providing increased time first for seminar projects and then for dissertation research and writing. But do the Droids need to write dissertations? It's hard to see why many traditional faculty would think so. Of course a number of people have been doing serious and intellectually ambitious work on rhetoric and technical writing for years, including political analyses of corporate writing, but the current premium on rhet/comp Ph.Ds, as opposed to M.A.s, in some corners of the job system is partly a product of mystification. In the assembly line comp course model a Ph.D has only limited pedagogical warrant. Meanwhile, demand for rhet/comp Ph.Ds now generally exceeds supply, but the profession will surely remain true to form and eventually generate an oversupply. I doubt if we are more than a decade away from that point.

All these forces will further undermine the value of the Ph.D, something we cannot defend without a better understanding of the dissertation's role in graduate training. What is at stake in writing a dissertation is not just preparation for future research. That is the general very narrow and, in my opinion, spiritually and culturally impoverished view that prevails. You write a dissertation to train you to do more such projects. If you are not going to do them, why write one? That seems as well to be Louis Menand's perspective on dissertation writing. Menand argues for a 3-year Ph.D with no dissertation or with only a moderately expanded seminar paper. Not only does he see dissertation writing as unnecessary; he sees it as culturally counter-productive, since it leads to inflated books that are little more than "articles on steroids."³

But there is also a pedagogical reason for undertaking elaborate doctoral research. A person who writes a dissertation, one hopes, leaves graduate training with an understanding of the discipline based on deep, extended, even obsessional intellectual commitment. A person who writes a dissertation has ever thereafter a certain model of intellectual devotion, of in depth study and reflection, as the only entirely appropriate and fulfilling way of coming to know anything well. It is that experience of thorough intellectual devotion that grants you the right to profess before a class. And every more casual intellectual encounter thereafter — every one of the hundreds of thousands of such casual encounters one promotes and requires as a teacher — is undertaken with knowledge of its inherent lack and limitation. You never thereafter believe the student who merely does his or her homework, whether carefully or perfunctorily, or who spends but a week on a seminar paper, has exhausted his or her potential or really traveled to the end of any intellectual journey. And as much as possible you try to embed echoes of more thorough devotion into the transitory work that actually occupies American classrooms. Writing a dissertation is thus part of the appropriate training in how to represent and transmit disciplinary knowledge. It also provides a model of intellectually committed writing, writing as a serious and extended undertaking, that can inform the perspective of any composition teacher. Do we really want our writing teachers to have never written anything longer than a seminar paper? That is what pedagogy loses when we stop hiring Ph.Ds or grant the degree without a dissertation. And that is the bright new world the MLA report is unknowingly offering to us with such pride in realism.

Proposals to dumb down the humanities Ph.D would have other negative consequences as well. Since no one is suggesting that physics or chemistry professors do not need to do dissertation research to get a Ph.D, the possibility of a two-tier credentialing and prestige system arises, with humanities faculty even lower in the professorial pecking order than they are now. Watering down the humanities Ph.D would help maximize the salary spread between disciplines, make it still easier to hire people without Ph.Ds to teach humanities courses, make humanities departments less competitive in the battle for campus resources, and turn us into less effective advocates in congress and elsewhere. If all this sounds wonderful, I've got a bridge I want to sell you.

Proposals like Menand's are also often linked with the alternative career model for the Ph.D, a plan almost every tenured faculty member thinks is the greatest thing since sliced bread. Advocacy for alternative careers, which the MLA is ready to embrace with giddy abandon, is without question the most cynical and self-interested solution anyone has offered to the job crisis. When I visited the University of Arkansas a few years ago to talk about the job market, a senior colleague rose to say he had little sympathy for people who viewed their failure to get an academic job as a disaster: "There are lots of things a Ph.D can do. You could go into the army." This was appropriately greeted with groans and protest from the graduate students in attendance, and I doubt if even an MLA president will have enough of a tin ear to call for that solution.

MLA presidents will no doubt instead pick glamorous, high- salary career alternatives with some creative component. Screenwriting is one obvious fantasy that might bedazzle jobless Ph.Ds. But no one needs a Ph.D to become a screenwriter. An Illinois graduate student left for Hollywood some years ago and became reasonably successful, but he bailed out long before writing his dissertation. Meanwhile, dangling T.S. Eliot's bank job before a new Ph.D — dissertation and Routledge book contract in hand — is not likely to win any gratitude for the MLA.

Faculty members like the alternative career model for other people for several reasons: it holds the promise of sustaining large graduate programs, along with their faculty perks; it gets complaining graduate students out of their hair; it allows faculty to combine their contempt for commercial employment with a hidden conviction that Ph.Ds who don't get academic jobs are not as good as those who do. But no graduate student who loves reading literature and being in the classroom wants to be told cheerfully that insurance companies are hiring.

There is good reason to design terminal M.A. programs with alternative careers in mind, since the skills we teach do have wide applicability. Furthermore, M.A.s have generally not yet fully internalized the classroom professor identity, so the likelihood of psychic damage is much less. Such programs should include courses and work experience linked to the alternative career, an option easier to realize at metropolitan campuses. But offering an alternative career to a talented Ph.D. is a cynically self-interested move. Furthermore, it offers no programmatic answers for the profession. There have always been some jobs outside academia where the Ph.D. is a valued credential — including jobs at foundations and government agencies — but there aren't enough of them to justify maintaining doctoral programs.

Yet that is far from the only misreading of the future built into this document. When the MLA committee members imagine the future of higher education they think full-time jobs with higher teaching loads, more service courses, less time for research. Well, folks, that degraded future is already past. Late capitalism has more exploitive working conditions than those in store for us. What's worse is that English more than any other discipline has helped pave the way for the alternative academic workplace and the full proletarianization of the professoriate. About this, the MLA's committee had not a clue. The future is one of part-time work dominated by corporate managers. Some of those managers will have Ph.D.s; indeed that may in the long run be the only full-time job market for the composition Ph.D. The rest of the M.A.s and Ph.D.s will do piece work. Academic freedom will be nonexistent. Salaries will hover at the poverty level except for those who work past distraction. And English departments have helped make this brave new world come true.

OUR HANDS ARE DIRTY

Confident for decades that literary studies opens Heaven's Gate, the discipline is about to learn it has been praying in a corporate lobby. English has in fact been an unwitting corporate partner in a project to defund, defang, and deform higher education as we know it. How has this happened? How can I make these claims?

English, I would argue, is the discipline most responsible for laying the groundwork for the corporate university. I refer to our employment practices. For English departments above all have demonstrated that neither full-time faculty nor Ph.D.s are essential to lower-level undergraduate education. What's more, we've shown that people teaching lower-division courses need not be paid a living wage. We can no longer claim that such courses have to be taught by people with years of specialized training. Like many departments, mine puts people in front of a composition class the semester after they earn their B.A. So the educational requirement to teach rhetoric is apparently a B.A., a summer vacation, and a week's training. A couple of years of graduate study, having completed M.A. course work and a proseminar in teaching, and they are then assigned "Introduction to Fiction" or other beginning courses.

Any research university that wanted to would be educationally justified in hiring such folks full-time at \$3,000 per course. In my own department two thirds of the undergraduate teaching is already done by graduate student employees without Ph.D.s. We can hardly justify hiring full-time faculty with Ph.D.s by arguing no one else is capable of teaching the courses, since we have already "proven" otherwise. Indeed, after an ethical decision to reduce the size of our graduate program, we were forced to turn to graduate students in other fields to teach our composition courses. We now hire more than a score of law students to teach introductory rhetoric. These "apprentices" are not even enrolled in the department's degree programs.

There is now some statistical support for these claims. Data from the 1993 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, based on fall 1992 hiring figures, is now available as a CD-ROM. More up-to-date figures will not be available for another couple of years, but they will hardly be heartening. Ernst

Benjamin of the national office of the American Association of University Professors has assembled the raw 1992 data into charts and passed them on to me. English departments nationwide had the largest percentage (2%) of the part-time faculty work force. Four other fields with much smaller work forces overall (Law, Communications, Computer Sciences, and Psychology) used a higher percentage of part-time faculty — English used 59%, whereas Law used 63% and Communications and Computer sciences each used about 55% — but most of those other disciplines were employing moonlighting professionals who were supplementing full-time jobs for prestige or pleasure. Thus colleges of Law regularly hire community lawyers part-time; notably, 99% of part-time law faculty in four-year colleges and 78% of them in two-year institutions have the appropriate professional degree. Communication programs often hire local journalists part-time. A number of other disciplines, like business and nursing, do the same with full-time practitioners in their fields. Taken together, English and Foreign languages — the MLA's constituency — accounted for 11% of the part-time faculty in 1999. And they amount to a block of people working at slave wages — people who depend on their instructional income for their living expenses — that dwarfs other small fields like philosophy, which accounts for but 3% of part-time hires.

Finally, a number of these fields, like law, use their part-time faculty to train students in professional schools, not for basic undergraduate instruction. It is above all English and foreign language departments that have proven that full-time Ph.Ds are superfluous for at least the courses they offer for the first two years of the undergraduate degree. If we then considered what graduate students having completed all doctoral course work might teach — and what salaries we could hire them at — the picture becomes still more troubling.

Here and there across the country that picture is already being filled out. At my own institution, the large lecture courses once categorically (and self-righteously) reserved for faculty are now sometimes taught instead by advanced graduate students. Thus the history and sociology departments sometimes have a graduate student give all the lectures in the 750-student Survey of American History or the 300-student introduction to Sociology. Still other grad students teach the discussion sections. No faculty members are involved. It's a great opportunity for the graduate student lecturers, who may well deliver a fine course, often replacing faculty who are far less eager for the task, but it also further undermines the need to employ Ph.Ds.

Of course it is still English departments that have pioneered the mass employment of college teachers at subminimum wages. English department employment practices have demonstrated that most — or even all — of the undergraduate degree can be handled by severely exploited labor. Indeed, many courses are taught at a profit. The gap between the tuition paid by the students in an introductory course and the salary paid to a part-time faculty member to teach it (from \$1,000 to \$3,500 per course) can be considerable. Moreover, do you really need a library, a gymnasium, a chapel, an auditorium, a student union, or an elaborate physical plant to teach such a course? Proprietary schools like the University of Phoenix have shown that we do not.⁴ As these forces come together in a moment of recognition, the corporate takeover of the profitable portion of the undergraduate curriculum becomes a possibility. As Arthur Levine writes, "high-technology and entertainment companies are viewing noncampus-based education as an opportunity"; we can look for "the growth of private-sector competitors."⁵ English has led the way in turning college teaching into a low-level service job; we are corporate America's fast food discipline.

It is worth calculating just what the hourly rate is for Ph.Ds paid \$1,000-1,500 per course, common salary levels at community colleges and proprietary schools. East-West University in Chicago, a four-year institution, paid \$1,000 per course to part-time faculty in 1997.⁶ Assuming 30 to 45 classroom hours, depending on the length of the term, assuming a rock-bottom minimum of two hours preparation time for each hour of classroom teaching, two hours a week of office hours, and a minimum of 75-100 hours of paper and exam grading per term, the hourly pay rate comes to under \$4 per hour. But this calculation makes two assumptions — that preparation involves reviewing familiar materials, not reading and

researching new topics, and that paper grading includes no extensive comments by the instructor. Getting involved in either of these traditional forms of teaching, let alone more extensive tutoring during office hours, can cut the rate of compensation to \$3 per hour or less. Meanwhile, ask yourself how many \$1,000-1,500 courses a person has to teach to assemble a reasonable livelihood? How much attention can students receive from someone teaching a dozen or more of such courses a year? Are subminimum wages for Ph.Ds to become the norm?

Two things are clear enough. First, paying faculty subminimum wages constitutes a genuine violation of professional ethics. It must be characterized that way by everyone involved in higher education. Second, this kind of brutally exploitive salary structure represents the single greatest threat to quality higher education and the greatest temptation for corporations contemplating hostile takeovers of our enterprise. It is not enough for organizations like the MLA to issue general statements urging fair compensation for adjuncts and part timers. MLA's report recommends that departments and institutions do "self- study" to determine whether their enrollment and compensation practices are fair. That's all well and good, but asking East- West University to look into the depths of its soul is really demanding they plumb the shallows.

The disciplinary organizations need to set minimum wages for part-timers and work to enforce them; there is no alternative. Full parity with full-time faculty is a necessary goal and a useful logic to deploy even if the goal remains distant. But the articulation of the principle alone will have little direct effect on the wages paid academia's exploited teachers. More direct and forceful action is needed from professional organizations.

Each discipline should publish an annual "Harvest of Shame" listing all departments and institutions paying less than \$3,000 or \$4,000 per course to instructors with Ph.Ds.⁷ It is also essential that abstract institutional responsibility for exploitive labor practices be shared by those staff members who benefit from that exploitation. Thus full-time faculty members and administrators from those schools should be barred from privileges like discounted convention room rates and barred from advertizing in professional publications. That means publishers could not advertise the books of those faculty in professional journals. I would also consider barring full-time faculty and administrators from such schools from publishing in journals published by professional associations and urging a ban on publishing in all university sponsored venues. Other ways of highlighting faculty and administrative responsibility should be found for institutions not oriented toward research. Regional campaigns should condemn the institutions involved. And professional organizations, as Karen Thompson of Rutgers University suggested at the 1997 national conference on adjunct and part-time faculty, should also consider censuring institutions that treat part timers unfairly by denying them all access to benefits like health care. Finally, a major national effort must be undertaken to brand schools paying less than \$2,000 per course to any instructor as rogue institutions that threaten the quality and survival of our higher education system.

There will be tremendous resistence among full-time faculty members toward any suggestion they should be personally penalized for their departmental or institutional policies. They will claim powerlessness, and however false that claim may be they will believe it. Some will argue with good reason that they are fighting to change exploitive practices at their own schools. Others will have so deeply entrenched a sense of entitlement that they will be convinced underpaid teachers are underpaid because they are inferior. Despite all this, I believe penalties must promote recognition of individual responsibility and accountability. Even the personal challenge built into the *prospect* of individual penalties for institutional behavior would be productive.

The only other argument mounted against an organized assault on part-time hiring practices is a particularly confused and defeatist one. I refer to the regular protest that some people want to teach part-time. First of all, no one wants to be paid \$1,250 per course for their teaching. Underpaid labor is devalued

labor. I would have fewer complaints about part-time employment if all Ph.Ds were paid at least \$4,000 per course and had health and retirement benefits, increased job security, and proper grievance procedures. But the simple fact is that no power on our corner of the earth will enable us actually to eliminate part-time employment. The best we can hope for is to raise wages and benefits, stop the trend toward shifting still more full-time to part-time jobs, and perhaps alter the overall ratio of positions somewhat. But we are not going to be able to eliminate part-time employment in the academy. There will still be plenty of bad jobs out there. Voicing fantasmatic fears that the freedom to be exploited will disappear should not count as rational argument.

Indeed, the only sound reason to hesitate taking any of these punitive actions is if the numbers of schools involved is too large and the threat of censure thereby becomes ineffective. Based on the national statement on part-time/adjunct faculty published in the January/February 1998 issue of *Academe*, on resolutions debated by the MLA's delegate assembly, and on the ongoing accrediting challenge to institutions with excessive reliance on part-timers, it seems the profession is beginning to counter this threat on several fronts.⁸ We must now intensify this effort. For if we do not resist this exploitation, we will eventually find corporate managed proprietary schools dominating the education market.

Numerous other changes in the intellectual and professional environment of academia would soon follow. Tenure of course would disappear. Yearly or term contracts with very narrow and vulnerable definitions of academic freedom are one certainty. The Pew Charitable Trust has recently given Harvard Professor of Higher Education Richard Chait a grant of over a million dollars to develop alternatives to tenure, long one of Chait's interests. "One size no longer fits all," he cheerfully announces about the granting of tenure; "the byword of the next century should be 'choice' for individuals and institutions."⁹ In what is a remarkably disingenuous scenario he suggests that "faculty so inclined should be able to forego tenure in return for higher salaries, more frequent sabbaticals, more desirable workloads, or some other valued trade-off." But of course exactly the reverse is the case. We will forgo tenure in exchange for lower salaries, no sabbaticals, and heavier workloads.

Most prospective faculty members will have less, not more, "choice" in Chait's brave new world. But "choice" is not the only slogan he cynically adopts; elimination of tenure and academic freedom, he suggests, will also help promote "diversity" in work arrangements. Meanwhile, other foundations linked to corporations, including the Mellon Foundation, are also mounting or supporting assaults on tenure. Some have suggested we measure the strength or weakness of current tenure policy by the level of public trust it elicits! Chait, on the other hand, has urged we decouple tenure from academic freedom and devise contractual guarantees for the latter. The proposals so far have been chilling at best.

The American Association for Higher Education has been a leader in seeking ways to restrict the intellectual freedom and independence of the professoriate. As part of their "New Pathways: Faculty Careers and Employment in the 21st Century" project, they have distributed Chait's work and that of others in a series of occasional papers that should be required reading for everyone interested in the future we face. In a 1997 AAHE working paper, J. Peter Byrne's *Academic Freedom Without Tenure*, prospective contractual guarantees of and limitations to academic freedom are expressed this way (the underlining is mine)¹⁰:

- Faculty members have the right to teach without the imposition or threat of institutional penalty for the political, religious, or ideological tendencies of their work, *subject to their duties to satisfy reasonable educational objectives and to respect the dignity of their students.*
- Faculty members may exercise the rights of citizens to speak on matters of public concern and to organize with others for political ends without the imposition or threat of institutional penalty, *subject to their academic duty to clarify the distinction between advocacy and scholarship.*
- Faculty members have the right to express views on educational policies and institutional

priorities of their schools without the imposition or threat of institutional penalty, *subject to duties to respect colleagues and to protect the school from external misunderstandings.*

It is the last requirement — to protect the school from external misunderstandings — that would have particularly amusing consequences in the corporate university. Imagine what caution these "guarantees" of academic freedom would instill in a faculty *none of whom had tenure*, but any and all of whom could be fired summarily. Moreover, once dismissed, the burden would be on faculty to file suit and seek to overturn an improper firing. In the present system the burden of proof in dismissing tenured faculty is on the institution, which must supply that proof in lengthy proceedings.

Imagine trying to defend your "reasonable educational objectives" in a court committed to upholding the institution's right to be protected from "external misunderstandings." Astonishingly, Byrne's proposal underwrites dismissal for any disagreement that produces public controversy, even for debates about institutional policies and goals. And his demand that we "respect colleagues" would obviously justify dismissal for a sharp disagreement with an administrator; of course anything as aggressive as a campaign to oust a dean or a president would warrant immediate removal of a faculty member. Chait promises a revised set of contractual guarantees for academic "freedom" soon, but I would not expect much comfort from them.

Perhaps I may offer my own version of a faculty contract in the hypothetical corporate university:

MOBILE OIL
brings you
MASTERPIECE CLASSROOM THEATRE

The Corporate University's Principles of Governance:

- 1) The student consumer is always right.
- 2) Contract faculty will maintain a cheerful and friendly demeanor at all times.
- 3) Contract faculty will avoid challenging, threatening, or upsetting student consumers.
- 4) All courses will be graded on the basis of clear, universally achievable goals. Divisive notions of excellence and quality will play no role in evaluating consumer performance.
- 5) All products of faculty labor are the property of the corporation.
- 6) Termination without notice is available for faculty noncompliance or insubordination.
- 7) All faculty members are provided with course syllabi and textbooks without charge. Management is responsible for course content.
- 8) All faculty possess presumptive redundancy. The need for their services will be reassessed each term.
- 9) All faculty must submit an annual report detailing how they can better serve the corporation's mission.
- 10) Faculty members have full academic freedom to accept these principles or to resign.

If this is the world we are heading towards, the MLA's smug, cautious, and constipated recommendations will do nothing whatever to avert it. But in many ways this is the world adjuncts and part-timers *already* inhabit, and the MLA is that much more culpable for failing to address it, for limiting itself to stating vague principles rather than taking actions. This dystopian satire is no more than daily life for many academics, and those in tenured positions who feel sorry for themselves need to see their own working conditions reflected in this cultural mirror. Many part-timers have little freedom to design courses, no role in governance, no job security, no power to counter irrational student complaints, and are subject to summary dismissal for the most trivial, confused, or flatly inaccurate reasons. Some work in fear or resignation, knowing their livelihoods depend on not offending administrators or challenging their students. And they work for wages comparable to those in the worst illegal sweat shops in the country.

Thus we may no longer be able to confront the job crisis for new Ph.Ds on its own. The multiple crises of higher education now present an interlocking and often interchangeable set of signifiers. Conversation about the lack of full-time jobs for Ph.Ds turns inevitably to the excessive and abusive use of part-time faculty or the exploitation of graduate student employees, which in turn suggests the replacement of tenured with contract faculty, which slides naturally into anxiety about distance learning, which leads to concern about shared governance in a world where administrators have all the power, which in turn invokes the wholesale proletarianization of the professoriate.

When Richard Chait, therefore, in an introduction to the New Pathways project, remarks, reasonably enough, that "technology threatens the virtual monopoly higher education has enjoyed as the purveyor of post-secondary degrees," we can and must recognize the implications along all the other cultural and institutional fronts his warning effects. But our own programmatic responses and strategies, adopted under pressure, can easily make things worse. Thus whatever external assaults on humanities research, tenure, sabbaticals, teaching loads, and other elements of university life are mounted will be underwritten by disastrous compromises made in good faith by departments themselves.

English departments, for example, are compelled financially and structurally to hire non-Ph.Ds at a time when Ph.Ds cannot get jobs. Doctoral institutions also hire postdocs at teaching assistant wages — often out of the altogether decent aim of giving them additional years to get traditional jobs — and in the process undermine the status of the profession and the future job market by proving that Ph.Ds can be hired at half or less the typical current rate for new Assistant Professors. And the department that hires a new Ph.D for \$3,000 a course is placing itself dangerously close to the salary scale adopted by the schools hiring Ph.Ds for half that or less. Meanwhile, those with instrumental visions of higher education have no patience with the critical distance humanities faculty would like to maintain from their own culture. Their goal is to strip higher education of all its intellectual independence, its powers of cultural critique and political resistance.

NOTES

1. On that score, let me add that the final report also includes a passage I have some warrant to take personally: "we believe finger-pointing, name-calling, political posturing and intellectual profiteering are inadequate as well as inappropriate responses." When I debated Sandra Gilbert in November 1997 at the annual meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Association, she read from the report and made it clear she had me in mind. Indeed these are much the same accusations she made against me in the January 1996 issue of *Academe*. Committee member Sander Gilman confirmed that I was the object of that passage in the report when I debated him at a University of Chicago conference the same month. So all the committee members have apparently felt pleased to sign on to an attack that lacks sufficient courage or honor to address me by name. Again, all this is obviously less important

than the vision of the profession the report puts forward. Gilman remarked as well that the MLA committee spent considerable time analyzing job market writings by myself and others and comparing and contrasting their recommendations and ours'. It is thus even more remarkable — indeed shabby and unprofessional — that they obliterated all citation of our work. In my case it is partly Gilbert's personal anger and partly her determination to prove that none of us who have criticized the MLA have made any contribution to the debate or the report's recommendations.

Since both my own previous work on higher education — and the work of my collaborators — includes a large number of practical suggestions not repeated here, I should provide citations. See Michael Bârubâ and Cary Nelson, eds. *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Cary Nelson, *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Cary Nelson, ed. *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); and several of my uncollected essays: "Superstars," *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (January / February 1997), 38-43, 54, "The Real Problem With Tenure is Incompetant Faculty Hiring," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 14, 1997), B4-B5, and "Between Meltdown and Community in Higher Education," forthcoming in the *minnesota review* in Spring 1998.

2. At the 1996 annual MLA, held in Washington DC, at a forum devoted to the job crisis, John Guillory challenged us to confront the crisis in its proper historical perspective. "Ask yourselves," he implicitly urged the audience, "how the ancient Greeks would have responded to such a crisis." Not believing that history is much help in solving anachronistic riddles, I can only say now that perhaps the ancient Greeks would have gotten on their cell phones to talk it through. Guillory himself had a stern warning to extract from his parable: "The worst thing that could happen," he announced, pausing for appropriate drama while we trembled in the plastic amphitheater of ancient Washington, "would be to let this passing crisis deflect us from our proper focus on transcendent verities toward a concern with the contingent and the political." In "Preprofessionalism: What Graduate Students Want" in the Spring 1996 ADE Bulletin he had suggested that the politicization of graduate students was a kind of manifestation of psychological pathology. Now he went further. The job crisis, he offered in a dark prophecy, just might politicize the profession as a whole. Well, so far he has little to worry about. Business as usual continues apace.

Yet the job crisis may have produced a new critical theory. Call it Addled Eco-Feminism. I refer to the talk by Adalaide Morris, currently chair of the University of Iowa's English department, which was presented on the same program. Morris spent twenty minutes offering a series of biological tropes for a profession in crisis. "The roots and branches are severed, cut off from each other and torn out of the ground. The webs are broken, the connections lost. The liquids that once flowed peacefully from branch to branch now drip on the ground and decompose." Morris never got beyond these images or offered any proposals, though it seemed plausible to suggest that a dehumidifier might solve our problems.

For more serious and productive accounts of the job crisis, readers might consult Christina Boufis and Victoria C. Olsen, eds. *On the Market: Surviving the Academic Job Search* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997).

3. See Louis Menand, "How to Make a Ph.D Matter," *New York Times Magazine* (September 22, 1996), 78-81.
4. For a devastating account of the University of Phoenix see James Traub's "The Next University: Drive-Thru U" in the October 20-27, 1997, issue of *The New Yorker* (pp. 114-123).
5. Arthur Levine, "How the Academic Profession is Changing," *Daedalus* 126: 4 (Fall 1997), 1-20.
6. My colleague Stephen Watt at Indiana University remembers that he was paid \$1,150 per course as a visiting lecturer at the University of Wyoming for the 1976-77 academic year, twenty years ago.
7. This suggestion would need to be worked out tactically, since the national list would be very large. The list might be assembled and distributed state by state to reduce the numbers and focus the

disapproval on local conditions. One would also need to decide how much pressure to place on schools at the upper end of the part time pay scale. The Art Institute of Chicago, for example, pays \$3,000 per course. Obviously a "Harvest of Shame" that shows all institutions as noncompliant would serve no purpose or even be counterproductive. At the same time one wants all part-time salaries raised. So one might need to set the figure so as to exempt schools at the upper end from criticism but warn that the minimum ethical salary would be raised each year.

8. Among the pertinent motions passed by the MLA's Delegate Assembly at its annual meeting in December 1997 — over the objections of its astonishingly conservative Organizing Committee — are two (Nos. 7-2 and 7-3) submitted in 1996 by Marc Bousquet: "Whereas the proportion of part-time teachers in the academy has accelerated to unacceptable levels over the past two decades, and / Whereas language and literature departments have been particularly vulnerable in this regard, and / Whereas this trend threatens academic freedom, faculty self-governance, democratic access to the profession, reduces opportunity for student-faculty interaction, and disables the production of new knowledge in the discipline, / We move that the MLA determine minimum standards of acceptable full-time/part-time ratios by various institutional circumstances, and report those standards by the next convention" and "We move that the MLA direct substantial efforts to convincing accrediting agencies that educationally sound full-time/part-time faculty ratios (measured on a department-by- department basis) should be a determining factor in the accreditation process." Although the MLA's CPE had these motions in hand, it chose not to recommend these more forceful actions in its final report.

A new motion by Michael Bennett (No. 8-7) would have strengthened the MLA's role still more, but it was tabled after the meeting lost its quorum: "Whereas the trend toward corporate downsizing and the resulting unprecedented levels of unemployment and underemployment have had an impact on U.S. higher education in terms of budget cuts; work speed-up; the elimination of jobs and, in some cases, of entire departments; and / Whereas increasing use of part-time and adjunct faculty, when combined with reliance on under-compensated graduate student labor perpetuates exploitive practices which undermine our profession; and / Whereas there is an urgent need for an activist movement on campuses that unites tenured and untenured professors, adjunct and part-time faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and other campus workers to resist this trend; / We move that the MLA advocate that non- graduate student teaching positions should whenever possible be full-time, with full benefits, at a living wage, and carrying reasonable expectations of job security, while teaching assistants should receive a living wage and full benefits; and / We further move that the MLA support unionization among campus workers at all levels and oppose reprisals against union activists; and / We further move that the MLA censure any department which relies on part-time or adjunct faculty for more than 50% of its credit hours taught and/or provides no benefits to non-full-time faculty. This censure will exclude these departments from all MLA services, including the MLA Job Information List."

Meanwhile, an effort to eliminate reference to graduate student employees from the CPE report was handily overridden.

9. See Richard Chait, "Rethinking Tenure: Towards New Templates for Academic Employment," *Harvard Magazine* (July-August 1997), 30- 31, 90, and "New Pathways: Faculty Careers and Employment in the 21st Century," *American Association for Higher Education*, March 1997. The latter document, issued as a background paper for attenders of a 1997 AAHE conference, is the source of my quotations from Chait. Also see Richard Chait and Cathy Trower, "Where Tenure Does Not Reign: Colleges With Contract Systems," (1997) AAHE New Pathway Working Paper Series. AAHE papers can be ordered from their office at One Dupont Circle, Washington DC 20036.
10. See J. Peter Byrne, "Academic Freedom Without Tenure?," (1997) *AAHE New Pathways Working Paper Series*. For a detailed critique of Byrne and contractual guarantees of academic freedom see Erwin Chemerinsky, "Is Tenure Necessary to Protect Academic Freedom?," (1997-98), *Occasional Papers from the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis*. The Center's occasional papers may be

ordered from their office at the University of Southern California, Wait Phillips Hall Room 701, Los Angeles, CA 90089.

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