



The Association of American University Presses, Inc.

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AAUP ANNUAL MEETING, JUNE 1974

The Uses of Ambiguity

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I think that one of the central characteristics of university publishing so far this decade is one that William Jovanovich noticed some years ago. He said of us scholarly presses that we "suffer . . . from a sense of ambiguity." If we do--and I think it is so--that ambiguity, I suggest, is much more strongly felt now than previously.

William Rainey Harper, as president of the University of Chicago, seemed to know perfectly well what the purpose of his press was. It was said of him, as most of us will remember, that "through the Press he believed that the university would be enlarged and carried to the ends of the earth. The Press was to be . . . built into the system, not an incident, or an attachment, but an organic part of the institution." So did Daniel Coit Gilman, of Johns Hopkins, before him, and Nicholas Murray Butler, of Columbia, after him. Butler felt that the university "falls short of the full realization of its aim" if, "having provided for the conservation and advancement of knowledge, it makes no provision for its dissemination as well."

I venture that all of us in this room, if put to it to say what the function of a university press is, would have found that an easier task in the sixties than at present. Of course we publish scholarship, but our aim has become, more than it was then, to publish scholarship that is noticed beyond the community of a single subdiscipline and that is salable in consequence outside that subdiscipline. In the words of the latest of William Becker's extremely useful surveys of the fiscal state of scholarly publishing--surveys, I might add, for which I think he and the colleagues who worked with him on the first of the surveys deserve the most profound gratitude of this Association--among the reactions common in university presses to new financial pressures was "publishing more salable books and fewer books with low sales potential." One press director is quoted in PMLA as follows: "I . . . will be unwilling in most cases to consider anything that is not strong enough in scope and subject matter and finish to attract a wide market, unless it carries with it a fairly heavy subsidy." Another says, speaking of literary criticism, "It is certainly true that it is going to become increasingly difficult to publish specialized monographs. . . . It was never easy and it is now going to be virtually impossible unless subsidies can be found."

Simultaneously, we are also reconfirming, you will have observed, our public commitments to our essential scholarly mission. Ashbel Brice, in the recent issue of Scholarly Publishing, argues with great felicity for the specialized monograph. About titles that achieve a wide general sale, he says, "I think such books are even more likely to lead us into financial difficulty." And Bill Becker, whose analyses are always informed by a humane sense of our responsibilities, invokes for us in his recent piece the overriding aim of "scholarly merit."

But far from being a characteristic belonging to university presses alone, this ambiguity, with, roughly speaking, money on the one side and elevated intellectual purpose on the other, is in fact typical of publishing of every kind. It has certainly long been felt in the universities. President Jordan, of Stanford University, who as a scholar was interested in ichthyology, is reputed to have complained that every time he learned the name of a trustee he forgot the name of a fish. But who, among all publishers, could not, in whatever decade, envy old John Jacob Astor's magnificent innocence in remarking, as he did to Julia Ward Howe, "A man who has a million dollars is as well off as if he were rich"? We all will understand what was in Daniel Appleton's heart as he examined the product of a trip to London taken by his son, W.H. Appleton, in search of new titles--a certain volume called The Book of Beauty. The elder Appleton penned a note to the younger that read: "The only misgiving I have regarding your success after I am gone, arises from my having noticed in you some symptoms of literary taste." And equally, we all understand the turn-of-the-century denunciation by one commercial publisher of, as he said, "the mad quest for the golden seller, the mad payment to the man who has once produced it, and the mad advertising of doubtful books in the hope of creating the seller--by pictures, dummies, big letters and other methods fit only for candy, whiskey, tobacco, and other articles of unlimited sale."

Where did publishing in America come from? Not by and large from the universities. Houghton was first of all a printer, William D. Ticknor was a clerk and a teller. The first two Harper brothers were also printers, and so was Matthew Carey. Father Appleton sold cloth, pins, needles, notions--and books. These were tradesmen, essentially, and we still speak, with some pride, of the book "trade." On the other hand, books have been and still are the medium by which we say some of the most serious and recollected things to one another that ever man wants to share. The vastest heights of our learning and our consciences are in our books and, indeed, many levels below those heights.

Ambiguity is not a condition, then, unique to our sector of publishing, nor, if we now are able to recognize it more clearly, is it unique to our times. And there are uses to ambiguity, if we can be clever enough to rise to the occasions it offers.

But what is it to rise to occasions? Perhaps example provides the best definition. Charles W. Couldock, the distinguished actor, was the principal

of a play in which the opening scene was between himself, another actor, and a third actor who played Mr. Couldock's elderly father. One evening the actor playing the father was nowhere to be found. The stage manager, in desperation, seized upon the janitor, made him up as the father, and seated him by the wings, assuring him that he, the stage manager, would deliver the few necessary lines from off stage. Unfortunately, when the curtain rose the manager happened to be on the other side of the stage, and as he hurried to take his place he ran into a projecting beam and knocked himself senseless. Over his head, the play progressed to the point at which the question of the father's precise age came up. "How old exactly is your father?" Mr. Couldock was asked. "Let us inquire of him," Couldock recited and went over to the janitor. "How old exactly are you, father?" Couldock said. There was no answer. A little urgently, Couldock repeated his question. "How old are you, father?" There was still no answer, and a moment of tension developed on stage. Couldock resolved it by turning on his heel, striding to the footlights, and addressing the audience directly. "My father," he explained, "is so goddam old he can't even talk."

That seems to be the spirit of rising to occasions.

But spirit, of course, is not enough. Spirit has to be married to the most careful, most realistic kind of planning--easier in some circumstances to conceive than to apply. At a recent meeting attended by some others here on the question of scholarly communication, it struck me again that the willingness present in the sixties in the scholarly and educational funding communities to assist us to publish more seems to be going the way of air conditioning and Sunday afternoon automobile drives. I detect, as I believe the others present did, a strong interest in the situation of scholarly publishing. Nevertheless, it is much more insistently said to us these days that there is too much in print, that our standards are not severe enough--and one even encounters in scattered cases something like outrage that we have made so many books.

The question of what is an adequate number of books is a tough one, and those who observe us ought to bear in mind Gene Hawes' remark that our books "will typically seem difficult to understand or unimportant to anyone without some background in the author's subject." Still, though I am most assuredly betting that additional sources of support will be found for our work, I bet also that the direction of that support will be to assist us to publish as much as we already do, and I bet that the kind of radical innovation Datus Smith has suggested to us is likely to be a condition of some instances of that assistance.

The earlier decades were also a period when, the strong admonitions I can remember to the necessity of adequate capitalization notwithstanding, it was not a monumental act to found a new university press. Now it surely has become one, and it is interesting to me to note that, even among the group of presses that I hope will be eligible for membership next year, none to my knowledge is fully a creature of the seventies.

The new environment of publishing is surely one in which we know more about ourselves than ever before. I have already mentioned Bill Becker's work in this regard, and the Government and Foundation Relations Committee, I know, under the chairmanship of Herb Bailey, hopes to be instrumental in creating a circumstance in which even more is learned, about ourselves, and about books in our society.

We also need to make use of studies prepared for other purposes that nevertheless bear upon our profession. One was Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma, by William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, which resulted from a course of research done under the sponsorship of the Twentieth Century Fund. Published in 1966, that study prefigured in substantial ways the economic difficulties that have faced and now face higher education. Would we had paid more attention to it. If there is a parallel, perhaps we now ought to be paying attention to the current curtailments of museum services in New York. Another more recent such study is by Allan M. Cartter. It is entitled "Faculty Needs and Resources in American Higher Education" and was published in The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (404 [November, 1972], p. 71). It should concern us to learn, in brief, that, after rising by a maximum of almost 30 percent in the period 1960-65, the college-age population is expected to decline by over 10 percent from 1980 to 1985. To quote Mr. Cartter, "After 1975, the demand for new teachers with the doctorate in higher education is likely to drop from about fifteen thousand annually to close to zero in the 1984-88 period. [This] factor will create a time of stress for higher education, most acute in the 1975-85 period and most burdensome on the graduate schools and on private institutions." This observation, I suggest, is of the utmost significance to us, and, as John E. Sawyer, of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, points out, there is relatively little that is conjectural about these figures, given the time frame of the study.

In rising to opportunities, friends help, and we have many, though I think there is more we can do as a group to preserve the ones we have and to earn new ones. I am certain that we have friends among the trade and educational publishers, who must realize that, the distinctive functions of the university press aside, it is an essential element of the infrastructure of learning in North America upon which their own prosperity very much depends. We have friends in the governmental granting agencies, who, I hope, will come to understand even more clearly that our distinctive function is scarcely distinguishable from the function of scholarship itself, to which they have provided such key support in the past. The forthcoming National Historical Publications Commission grants, in which the Government and Foundation Relations Committee has played such a major role, are a heartening example of the consequence of that kind of conviction. And friends in the private foundations, who, I think, will be the more eager to support our work to the degree that we can demonstrate that we are not only maintaining but improving what many of them will see as a fundamental university-based information system. I suspect that, to the degree we learn to cooperate among ourselves in the interest of speed, economy, and precision in the transfer of fact and interpretation, to that degree they may be led to encourage our cooperation in material ways.

There is another constituency that offers important endorsement of what it is we do: those separate individuals who are concerned with learning in North America--responsible businessmen, artists and patrons of the arts, congressmen, and others. I think it wholly appropriate that we continue to take steps to see that such persons are informed about university publishing and its needs.

At once our prime resource and our prime market, scholars themselves, and others directly participating in scholarship, like research librarians, are the most important constituency, and I hope that scholars can be ever more intimately involved in the work of this Association. Now it as editors we often see them but much more rarely as representatives of university publishing.

So the intelligent practice of ambiguity is a many-faceted task, requiring, most of all, steady and open communication among ourselves. It does already exist, of course, but I sense that it can be improved. "Communication" is a word nearly ruined by casual use, and what I mean is perhaps best conveyed by reverse example.

This illustration is set in Newport, which, at the height of its fame, was as you know the scene of extravagant entertainments, among them a costume ball. The wealthy Henry Carter, of Philadelphia, was in attendance, together with his wife, a handsome, Junoesque creature. Upon their arrival, Mr. Carter whispered to the butler charged with announcing the characters portrayed that he was dressed as Henry IV, and his wife represented a Norman peasant. The butler studied her for a moment, arrayed as she was in a contrivance of varicolored cloth, and then shouted, "Henry the Fourth, and an enormous pheasant!"

Among the lessons, I suppose, is that of speaking up and minding one's p's.

If communication is going to be successful, this Association must keep strictly in mind its naturally broad geographic base. Accidents of difference in size and proximity to other, similar institutions may tend to create pulls in one direction or another that should be recognized and often resisted, I think.

I am also of the opinion that, for balance vertically as well as horizontally, we should continue to keep firmly in mind the need for participation in the affairs of the Association at all levels of our staffs.

If, then, the ambiguity of which I speak may be no defect at all but a positive force, and if we can together grasp the methodology of managing that ambiguity, to what ends should it be managed, beyond the obvious ones?

To the end, I suggest, that the special authority we have as scholarly publishers is applied to the important publishing issues that rest on other

consciences besides ours but, may I say, no better ones. It is, for instance, astonishing to me that so many of our universities seem to support such erosions of copyright as are posed, at least in potential, by the combination of three important university libraries with the New York Public Library in a program of systematic photocopying. I am sure those libraries conceive of this program as contributing to the public good, but we can see that there is a real danger that it will not. How ironic it is that we, who are part of the universities and have served them so well over so many years, should ourselves be served in these matters so badly by them. But let us not cease to press our case. It takes little time. As Quince says to Snug, who proposes to play the lion's part in Midsummer Night's Dream, "You may do it extempore, for it is nothing but roaring."

Another is the fulfillment of new roles in scholarly communication. In the light of the studies I have cited earlier, it seems to me a matter of first importance for us to demonstrate to the universities that we are located far more intimately in the geography of the purposes and values of higher education than some few administrators seem now to believe. We will do this, I suggest, by making the service we provide by its character even more essential to the parent institutions. I happen to believe, let me say, that translation is an important role of the university press: the enrichment of scholarship originally in English with scholarship not so. Scholars themselves admit the fragility of the assumption of their own multilingualism, and it is certainly an exercise of cultural arrogance to believe that most of what it is needful to know is written in English. I know the task is a difficult one, but I hope we will continue earnestly to try to make progress in securing major foundation support for a translation program.

And a most important end is to be able to take some modest steps, at least, in bringing into better being the information community that is now dimly sensed by publishers, librarians, information scientists, and scholars alike.

I have not said a word about the "central office," but I cannot conclude without doing so. To Jack Putnam, Carol Franz, and all those fine people, let us convey our thanks. Whatever this Association accomplishes rests on the solid foundation of their professional gifts and initiative, so amply demonstrated during the past year.

And to you, ladies and gentlemen, my thanks, in the name of everyone here, mutually, for I have observed once again this year, as in years past, that network of concern and instruction that does connect us all, one to the rest, and I and others have cause to be grateful for it.