Back to Basics

Reflections on the Cultural Role of the University Press in a New Age

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In a way, my talk can be viewed as an extended footnote to the advice that Stanley Katz gave us in the new issue of The Exchange: "don't give up on serious scholarly monographs, editions and journals."

The title I have given to my talk is "Back to Basics," and you will know why by the time I finish.

I was raised in the Herb Bailey school of publishing, and at Princeton during his tenure as director there was never any question that the heart and soul of university press publishing was the scholarly monograph. In the last decade, however, it would appear that defending the scholarly monograph as the main raison d'etre for university press publishing has become something of a rearguard action against the advancing forces of cultural imperialism that seem to have captured the fancy of many press directors and their staffs. Thus Les Phillabaum, writing about "The University Press and Suitable Priorities" in PW last year, stated his "firm conviction that university press lists should be as broad, diversified and all-encompassing as possible" and confessed himself to have "grown weary" about all the "chatter" concerning the publication by presses of trade books, "in particular novels." And Ken Arnold, in a PW article about university press publishing in September 1989, was quoted, as though he were boasting, that at Rutgers "we have almost stopped publishing the short-run monograph...[and in 1988] did just one." Ken, you may remember, presented us all with a challenge at the AAUP meeting in Tucson in 1987 to widen our cultural horizons and think more creatively about how to "broaden our audience." He identified the "basic" problem for us then as our not "being accustomed to making judgments on our own and testing those judgments in the marketplace...because most of our decisions are validated by faculty committees.... We do not take it as part of our responsibility to contribute to or comment on the culture of our

time because that requires that as individuals and publishing companies we modify the requirements and barriers of objectivity." The message from Ken and Les, in short, seems to have been "let a thousand flowers bloom!"

Despite my great admiration for Ken and Les both as individuals and as creative publishers, I worry about the direction in which they and some other directors have been pointing us. I worry because now, more than ever before, there is reason to think that monograph publishing, especially in some fields of scholarship, is in real danger of not being able to sustain itself. Herb Bailey's report for the AAUP and ACLS last year gave currency to the idea that there might be "endangered species" in some areas of scholarly publishing. His survey, it is true, did not demonstrate any decline in the number of monographs published during that period; in fact, it showed that the total had increased by a whopping 51%! But the reason was that this was a time of rapid growth for almost all presses. Using AAUP statistics, I drew up a list of the largest university presses as of 1989 and compared their output of titles in that year with their output ten years earlier. Only one of those presses, Harvard, did not expand at all; overall that group of presses grew by 78%, with some having really substantial increases--SUNY, for instance, an amazing 676% and Rutgers 433%! I then did a quick telephone survey of the ten largest presses and found out that four of those presses expected to have little or no growth during the next five years. Only one of the remaining six anticipated growing at a faster rate than it did in the past decade; and most of the rest were planning expansion of less than 15 percent in the coming five-year period. The survey

also revealed that although most presses do not set strict numerical guidelines for editors to limit their acquisitions of books with expected sales of less than 1,000 copies, nevertheless at all of the presses editors are being encouraged to look for better-selling titles and discouraged from acquiring too many low-selling monographs.

This is hardly a scientifically respectable survey, but it does reveal the incentives that are now in place at the largest presses, at least, and suggests the possibility that some "species" of scholarly publishing may well become "endangered"--if not completely extinct--in the next decade, especially in those fields like music or African studies where average book sales are already well below 1,000 copies, fields that have been increasingly abandoned by presses in recent years. And there is not much reason to hope that the major market for these kinds of monographs, college libraries, will experience a resurgence any time soon. A sobering article in PW in February entitled "The Library 'Doomsday Machine'" showed that, owing to the 51% increase in serials prices from 1985 to 1989, college libraries reduced expenditures on monographs proportionately, leading to a 16% decline in purchases, which translated into roughly 5,300 fewer monographs per library or 570,000 for ARL member libraries overall--a loss of nearly $23 million for monograph publishers!

With the market for monographs continuing to shrink, presses naturally have looked elsewhere for areas of publishing to cultivate, and the past decade has seen a flourishing of activity in the acquisition of more titles of regional interest, books with potential

for course adoption in paperback, even some outright textbooks, reference works, nonfiction trade books, reprints of titles dropped by commercial houses, and of course poetry and fiction. A hundred flowers have indeed been blooming! The danger is that, with presses not planning to expand their lists at the same rate as in the past but already engaged in the publishing of many other kinds of books besides the traditional monograph, the momentum of the latter will come more and more to crowd out the monograph from presses' lists, further marginalizing it and speeding it on the way to "endangered species" status. Anyone who takes a look at a random sample of presses' seasonal catalogues today, in fact, will see the clear evidence of this trend under way; they are beginning to look all the more like the lists of general trade publishing houses, and one has to make an effort to find the monographs amidst everything else.

Mind you, I am not at all opposed to the publication of other types of books besides monographs. In fact, I agree that it may well be necessary to continue publishing these other kinds of books just in order to be able to continue publishing monographs, too. I do, however, have substantial reservations about the publishing of fiction, both poetry and prose, at university presses. Poetry especially, of course, has a long and distinguished tradition of sponsorship by university presses, going back all the way to 1919 when the Yale Series of Younger Poets was established, and there are over twenty presses with active poetry programs now. Since 1960 these presses have issued over 900 volumes of poetry. The publishing of novels and collections of short stories is of much more recent vintage, coming into its own really only after the mid-1970s

(Illinois's Short Fiction series got started in 1975, for instance), although some presses were engaged in it earlier in conjunction particularly with their regional lists. Today a very large number of presses do at least some fiction publishing. For many presses the regional connection remains of primary importance; thus Illinois has its Prarie State Books series. Others are heavily engaged in publishing translations of foreign fiction--Columbia with its Twentieth Century Continental Fiction Series, for example. Some, like Georgia, have made solid connections with groups like the Associated Writing Programs and publish prize winners like the titles winning the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. The scope and diversity of presses' fiction lists are indeed impressive!

What makes me uncomfortable about publishing fiction within a university press setting is the lack of close fit with the original goals university presses were established to serve and with the editorial procedures and marketing techniques they have developed to carry out that primary mission. Les Phillabaum, in his PW article, tried to give an expansive reading to that oft-quoted statement by Daniel Coit Gilman about the rationale for establishing a university press at Johns Hopkins in 1878. Said Phillabaum: "Note that the mandate, set down...by...Gilman..., is to advance knowledge, not scholarship. Gilman's imperative was not elitist; if anything it was a populist injunction." I think that is simply a misreading of the historical record, which is nicely outlined by Dennis Carrigan in his lead article in the April 1991 issue of Scholarly Publishing. There he shows that the underlying rationale was to provide, through the dissemination of its own faculty's research, a means for a

university like Hopkins to enhance its institutional prestige for the ultimate purpose of securing financial resources in the form of grants from outside sources. (Perhaps it is no accident that today Johns Hopkins is far and away the largest recipient among universities of government grants for research!) That, to me, doesn't suggest any populist philosophy of publishing at all.

The publishing of scholarly monographs and journals clearly accords best with this originating purpose, which is emphasized in the AAUP's own flyer about "What Is a University Press?" In serving scholars over their hundred-year history presses have developed to a fine art certain procedures for validating new contributions to knowledge through a careful process of scholarly peer review; and they have also become expert in marketing their books and journals directly to the scholarly community, not only in this country but worldwide.

Poetry and fiction publishing do not fit comfortably within this framework. Procedures for reviewing them necessarily have to be quite different from the procedures used for evaluating scholarly monographs. I remember at Princeton how ill at ease the faculty editorial board felt when asked to pass judgment on poetry manscripts--except, during his period of service, one board member who happened to be married to the well-known poet Alicia Ostriker, who became for all practical purposes a board member <u>in absentia</u> for that special purpose! And the marketing of poetry and, even more, fiction requires techniques in which presses are not, by habit and tradition, expert; direct-mail marketing, for instance, in which presses excel, does not lend itself so readily to the marketing of

poetry and fiction, where the audiences are much more amorphous and diffuse, as it does to the selling of scholarly monographs, which have highly targeted audiences easily reachable by specialized mailing lists.

But, beyond these problems, which have always existed, there are two more reasons today to wonder how strong a commitment university presses should continue to make to publishing poetry and fiction. One reason is that, buoyed by recent grants form the Mellon Foundation and the Reader's Digest Fund amounting to over $6 million, the so-called small independent publishing houses are entering a period of productivity and support the likes of which they have never experienced before; and a major focus of these houses is the publishing of fiction, of just the "risky" kind that gave university presses their justification for entering the scene to pick up what the larger commercial houses were dropping. A second, different but equally important, reason is that universities are now being scrutinized by government and the media as never before, and we should be wary of pursuing activities that may be difficult to explain in this kind of public forum. The specter of UBIT (Unrelated Business Income Tax) was already hanging over our heads before Stanford's misuse of government funds brought internal university business into the headlines; the atmosphere is now such that pursuit of UBIT-type inquiries can only be expected to increase. Will presses, if called to the mat, be able to provide sufficiently persuasive arguments to justify publishing poetry and fiction as part of their educational mission? I think those universities with strong creative writing programs, or state universities with a clear

mandate for service to the citizens of their state and residents of their region, will be best positioned to make compelling arguments. But it is none too early to reexamine poetry and fiction publishing programs to consider just how defensible they are in the light of UBIT and the resurgence of the independent publishing sector.

My main caution, though, is to urge that the excitement that comes from publishing poetry and fiction not be allowed to overwhelm the duty to continue publishing monographs and increasingly push them to the margins of our lists. What I most want to propose is a reorientation of perspective--taking all these other kinds of nonmonograph publishing not to be so much ends in themselves as means to help us sustain our first and foremost priority: our dedication to keeping the lifeblood of scholarship flowing through the monograph stream. This is nothing very radical I am suggesting. Indeed, Malcolm Call, one of our most enterprising directors who has pursued fiction publishing with great success and considerable pizzazz, said as much when he talked to an Atlanta Constitution reporter in 1988 who asked about his reasons for publishing more popular titles. "With the added funds, [Malcolm explained,] the press can afford to publish more monographs which, despite the money some of them lose, are still [the press's] first responsibility. 'If we turned our back on that function, we would have no real reason to exist.'"

In truth, given the imperilled state of monograph publishing, we have only a limited number of alternatives for surviving as real university presses. In closing, I'd like to sketch them and make a few suggestions for projects for the AAUP to pursue.

First, there is the always tempting possibility of obtaining more financial support from institutions: one's own university to begin with (including alumni donors specifically targeted with the assistance of the university's development office); other universities (which can be called on to provide subsidies for individual faculty members' books being published by presses at other universities but which the AAUP may also want to consider approaching in some more systematic way, to share the costs of scholarly publishing more equitably across the entire universe of higher education institutions in this country); foreign governments (the model here being the Spanish Ministry of Culture, which the AAUP might try to get other governments to emulate); the U.S. government, of course, through the NEH particularly (although the NEH's current criteria for selection emphasize general interest titles more than specialized monographs--the latter, ironically, being the books most in need of support!); and, finally, private foundations like Mellon. From a visit I made to see Bill Bowen at the Mellon Foundation late last month, I can tell you that university presses can't expect any <u>direct</u> subsidies from Mellon anytime soon; but the Mellon people are very sympathetic to the problems we face and ready to offer indirect support. For instance, I was advised that the Carnegie Corporation and MacArthur Foundation might be receptive to an approach from the AAUP at this time, and I was given the names of specific staff people there to contact; at the same time, I was also warned that the efforts Andre Schiffren has been making to raise funds from foundations (over a million dollars already) to launch his own nonprofit version of Pantheon might

jeopardize the chances of university presses to succeed in engaging the interest and financial support of such foundations, especially if Schiffren's initiative should come acropper and leave foundation staffers with a bad feeling about nonprofit academic publishing. I was told, in short, that now is the time for the AAUP to strike, while the iron is hot!

Another possibility is that electronic publishing, already fast developing, may evolve to a point where it can assume at least some, if not all, of the burden of scholarly monograph publishing. This is a vision that both librarians and scholars themselves are quickly becoming enamored of. Let me read you this excerpt from a letter I received in January from a former member of Princeton's editorial board, who is himself a humanist:

> ... I have advocated for a long time that those of us who cannot or do not wish to enter the university press system ought to work out a way of communicating our ideas using the many reproduction opportunities--desktop publishing, I guess--now available. We shouldn't need all that expensive production anyway in order to reach a couple of hundred people in the world who might be interested in reading us. And things do get around using informal circuits. If a highly specialized paper had something in it of more general interest, I am fairly confident that there are informal networks of communication out there that would ensure its dissemination. The presses themselves might benefit from such a system, since they would be able to pick up for more elegant production and more effective distribution work that had already proven itself, as it were, in the cheap, informal circuit. A change of this kind wouldn't necessarily make it harder to get tenure. People (not only tenure committees but individual scholars) might become less fixated on the Book, which would be a good thing all round, and more attention might be paid to the substance of a scholar's work than to the material form in which it appeared. Above all, we would be rid of the artificial constraints of the book (which the scientists have never had to endure) and free

> to invent the forms of communication that seem most appropriate to what we have to say....

That is a very seductive vision and a very powerful statement that we would all do well to reflect upon. Librarians, too, have a similar vision of electronic publishing's potential to alter fundamentally our ways of communicating knowledge. Consider Eldred Smith's provocative article in the January issue of Scholarly Publishing where she advocates "the planned and organized creation of a single electronic database that includes all edited and refereed scholarly publication" and links it to the "the National Research and Education Network currently under development in the United States." Smith, by the way, calls in this article for "active exploration on the part of the organizations currently most qualified to speak for scholarly publishers and research librarians on such matters--the Society for Scholarly Publishing and the Association of Research Libraries." No mention of the AAUP here--or anywhere else in her article!

Finally, I return to the theme I broached earlier, seeing another alternative to external institutional support and electronic publishing to lie in the possibility for generating the funds for subsidizing monograph publishing from internal sources--that is, other areas of the press's own publishing program, as Malcolm Call suggested. There is much that could be said about the potential for further income growth from the different types of publishing I listed earlier--regional, paperback, reference, reprint, trade, etc. But I want to focus here on just one aspect of the future possibilities for trade publishing by university presses, viewed as an instrumental, income-generating activity. The fate of Pantheon

should have made abundantly clear to everyone who did not already realize it that the retreat of conglomerate-controlled commercial publishers from serious nonfiction "mid-list" publishing during the past decade has opened up a major opportunity for university presses to publish trade books with potential sales of 3,000 copies and up, and some presses, like Princeton, have already made vigorous efforts to exploit it, wisely building on the preexisting strengths of their lists in special academic fields so as to keep disruption of their editorial procedures and marketing practices to a minimum. Princeton, as many of you know, joined California and Blackwell's in an ambitious program a few years ago to beef up their direct representation to bookstores, and now this trio of publishers has one of the most effective bookstore-selling operations for academic presses anywhere in the world. But this program will have only limited success, ultimately, so long as this country continues to have a deplorably inadequate range of media for reviewing these "general interest" titles. We really have no counterpart in this country to the TLS, which generally reviews books quickly and competently and has a wide enough circulation to bring books to the attention of people besides those specialists who read professional journals--where, of course, reviews typically don't appear for a year or more, long after the effective period for bookstore interest in a new title. What we need is a publication that would seek to review, within six months after publication, a substantial number of the "frontlist" titles of university and other scholarly presses, with sufficient depth to do more than give a quick summary evaluation, of the kind that appears in Choice or Publishers Weekly. If it were a

monthly review of about 120 pages covering 40 books per issue, that would allow close to 500 books to be covered each year.

The value of such a journal would be severalfold. First, it would enhance communication among scholars across disciplines in this increasingly interdisciplinary world (where historians use anthropological approaches, literary theorists draw upon philosophy, social scientists are enraptured by attention to their "rhetoric," etc.). Second, it would encourage the writing of more "synthetic," broader-ranging works because it would ensure both that a market exists for them and that the authors would get some academic credit for writing them (assuming this would be a journal operated in such a way as to have high prestige in the academic community). Third, it would support the further development of the "independent" bookstore that caters to readers of serious nonfiction books with special interests. Fourth, it would provide wider exposure for university presses among the general public, in keeping with the kind of outreach that is now being encouraged by, for example, the NEH in its book publication subsidy program.

To launch such a journal is a major undertaking that is undoubtedly beyond the means of any single press. Carlin Romano, former book review editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer with whom I discussed this idea last week (and who would be an ideal editor for such a new book review) strongly recommended that it be launched with maximum effort and publicity at the outset, not started on a small scale and then built up over time. This would mean funding on an order of magnitude that most definitely would require significant foundation support. Thus I would be inclined to propose it now as a

cooperative effort for university presses to pursue, perhaps through a special AAUP task force. All of us would stand to benefit by the existence of such a book review, and it therefore seems appropriate to make it a collaborative undertaking.

Once again, though, I want to reiterate my underlying purpose in suggesting it: to make possible the generation of greater income from sales of trade books that could then be applied to subsidize internally the continuance of our core monograph publishing activities--the be-all and end-all of our existence!