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A Call for Slow Writing

By Lindsay Waters

What will it take to make essays the standard of achievement once again in the scholarly world? This is not where we are: Books are the gold standard for tenure in most of the humanities and some of the social sciences, so much so that journal articles almost don’t even count. As august a figure as Helen Vendler assured me recently that essays could never replace books as a basis for tenuring junior colleagues. So, in departments of English as on Wall Street, counting is all that counts. “It’s the bottom line, stupid.” Countability is the thing whereby you’ll catch the conscience of the dean, as a friend of Hamlet might advise the young Danish assistant professor or the young Shakespeare scholar. Articles don’t make a thumping sound when you drop them on a table the way a body might in Six Feet Under.

I have claimed elsewhere (subscription required) that the book-for-tenure system is coming to an end, that it is unsustainable, that its growth has been an obscenity, because it was mindless, because it sought to make something automatic and machine-like play the role that should only be played by the soul. Please excuse my antiquated language: The “soul,” I remind you, is that faculty of the human body whose juices are made to flow by the exercise of judging myself whether something is of merit. In earlier publications I have charged that professors have been seeking to dodge the one activity that is most essential to their own development when they outsource tenure decisions to bureaucracies and counting replaces reading as the central job of tenure committees, because in that situation content goes by the by. Personally, for me as a publisher, the situation that has arisen is sad beyond endurance. I believe the contents of the books I publish matter. I am not selling milk, which does sustain life, but is homogenized by comparison to book. In fact, milk’s the very definition of homogenized. Each of the books I publish is different.

Books are the standard now, and for me to ask you to think that the future will feature the renaissance of journals and the replacement of the book by the essay might seem crazy. (You should know that it does not seem crazy to many of the leading university press publishers.) My suggestion is not crazy; it’s utopian. We don’t live in that world I am asking you to imagine, the world in which essays are the norm, but if we were to imagine that world could exist even for a second, how might seeing things that way cause us to change what we are doing?

We need to slow down, and remember that the essay has been the main form for humanistic discourse. The book is an outlier. Many of the writings that changed the direction a scholarly community was marching toward were essays. Think of Edward Said’s “Abecedarium Culturae” or Paul de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” to stay in recent history and not begin, as I
easily could, an epic catalog from Montaigne’s “De l’amitié” onwards. Some of the most important books are collections of essays, sometimes assembled with no pretence to forging a unity of them, such as John Freccero’s *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*. One could give many examples.

There is no good reason why the essay should not replace the book, and a lot of good reasons why it should. I am tempted to say — in order to be maximally provocative — that anyone who publishes a book within six years of earning a Ph.D. should be denied tenure. The chances a person at that stage can have published something worth chopping that many trees down is unlikely. I ask you: How are you preparing for the future that could be yours and mine? We — I mean the world in general — don’t need a lot of bad writing. We need some great writing. “Pump Up the Volume” has been the watchword in the scholarly world and in America long before that movie with Christian Slater came out. “Don’t Believe the Hype” somehow got twisted into “Believe the Hype” along the way, too. Totally.

The big problem that afflicts the humanities in the United States is not a problem of quantity. Yes, I know, some politicians ridicule university administrators who retain on their staff professors who produce so little by way of income, student-credit hours served, and publications. The newspapers said that U.S. troops could “walk tall again” after conquering Granada. Will professors be able to walk tall again if they produce tall heaps of publications on the scale of manufactured goods coming out of the factories in Suzhou? (If you don’t know where Suzhou is, look it up. It’ll do you good. You are going to want to know in fewer years than you can imagine.)

No, the productivity problem of professors in the U.S. is not one of quantity, but quality. (Same is actually the case in China, too.) I recently got a book proposal that I decided to look at closely rather than reject it summarily as I knew it deserved. It consisted of a welter of confusing sentences. It was contemporary, very up-to-date, located right where the profession is. And the scholar, though young, was very accomplished in the way the world judges achievement, a dozen or more fellowships, a book from a major press, tenure too at a respectable university. But the views in the proposal were those manufactured by others and the linking of them in the proposal had no coherence, and the problem was manifest in the clumsy writing. Who had ever read anything by this young scholar seriously before, I wondered?

Has social passing come to grad school? A friend teaches in a clinic to help people from 3 to thrice 20 to remedy problems of speaking and reading. I have been curious about the stories she tells me of people in their 50s confident enough about their personal success in life to address what used to be a source of deep embarrassment — the fact that although they could talk like a college grad they could not read better than a second-grader. It takes great self-acceptance to go to the clinic at that age and confess you cannot read and to be taught the things little kids learn.

One of the chief explanations these learners give for how it was they got by for so long without learning the basics of reading is social passing, the decision of teachers to ignore what it is they think they cannot deal with. Imagine an air-traffic controller ignoring some slight intimation a plane is going off course? You cannot, but you know that Captain Delano in *Benito Cereno* stifled his worries that something was amiss on the San Dominick. Problem too big for me to solve. “I’m a mere fourth grade teacher. I cannot remedy such a huge problem. The system is so much bigger than me or this kid. The principal will be angry if classes get clotted up with the unfortunate. Pass.” So a person might say to themselves privately. Are professors in grad
school saying such things to themselves now? I am sure most of them are not, but some must be. Otherwise how did this person get this far writing like this? This person is not alone.

In his *Enemies of Promise*, Cyril Connolly lambasted Joseph Addison, co-founder of the journal *The Spectator* because he was “an apologist for the New Bourgeoisie.” The problem: Addison wrote playfully and unapologetically about nothing, casting a smokescreen in front of his readers. Addison is like Zizek. If Zizek is a success — and you know he is — the consequences are worrisome. The kids who flock to see him might try to write like him. In fact, if the elders present Zizek as a star speaker, then what is a kid to think? If this stuff flies, my prose — a young scholar might reasonably say — can crawl and stumble and I can become a superstar of theory, too.

I believe sometime in the dark backward and abysm of time, when Zizek was closer to Hegel and Lacan, he must have been a good expositor of the thinking of Lacan, but he is not now. He’s an entertainer, an ersatz version of real explorers like Derrida and Umberto Eco. People used to complain bitterly about the way Derrida, DeMan, Deleuze wrote. Such people’s problem was that they did not pause to read what newly emergent scholars wrote. Derrida and the others wrote perfectly well. Their sentences were difficult to read, perhaps, but they parsed. It is different with Zizek. The torrent that flows from him is like (to go to a realm he’s visited to criticize someone else and very unfairly, too, I might add) a toilet overflowing.

As one critic of his writes, “He does not develop a clear-cut idea, nor does he structure a book around a definable topic. His proofs are mostly introduced with an ‘of course,’ or ‘it is clear why’. He delivers what his fans want — razzamatazz.” Pascal wrote, “A maker of witticisms, a bad character” (*Pensees*, p 12). Let me give a sentence of his to be concrete: The first sentence of the Preface of his new book *For They Know Not What They Do* is: “There are philosophical books, minor classics even, which are widely known and referred to, although practically no one has read them page by page (John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*, for example, or Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit*) — a nice example of interpassivity, where some figure of the Other is supposed to do the reading for us.” First of all, even if you accept the Lacan-lingo (“other”), what could the made-up word “interpassivity” mean? And why would I want to know when, second, the sentence in which it occurs is a lie, not a clever one, but a stupid one. Almost 300,000 people have bought the Rawls and the reading of it was so important to enough of them that they have kept their copies of the book, so the used book market is not swamped with copies. And Brandom has nowhere like the same sales, but his book is an international sales success. Remember the “blancmange” skit in Monty Python? Zizek’s writing is “blanc-et-noir mange.” It was a style. Eliot complained the West was but a heap of broken images. Zizek, in this still a Soviet sympathizer, wants like Kruschev to bury us in the heap of his verbiage. It’s not fun anymore, if it ever was. Beware, Mr Zizek, Connolly also says that “one can fool the public about a book but the public will store up resentment in proportion to its folly.” Words suffer under the whip of such a taskmaster.

If words lose out, so do we all: We are in danger of losing our souls, our backbones, our bearings. We are in danger of losing the civilization that was created in the West in the Renaissance. Until I’d read Ingrid Rowland’s book on 16th century Rome, the Rome of Raphael, I had not known about what I’ll call “the Renaissance of the sentence.” I’d lived in Florence when I decided to study the Italian Renaissance, and I’d gotten a very concrete sense of the how, what, when of the Renaissance of architecture at Santo Spirito. I knew about the Renaissance of narrative plotting from immersing myself in Ariosto and Milton and seeing the debate about plotting over Tasso. But the Renaissance of the Sentence — it had never
occurred to me. Hadn’t the monks kept the art of the sentence alive through the Dark Ages? Short answer: No.

Ingrid Rowland recounts how Angelo Colocci (aka “Serafino Aquilano”) pioneered the transformation of writing in vernacular Italian. No longer was it revolutionary to use the vernacular instead of Latin; no, revolutionary was using the vernacular with rhythm, with passion. The point of writing in such a way was because it unleashed a power one could have using word to “unlock the emotions through a combination of words and music.” To write in this way was to have style, what Colocci called “modo.” Sure, one could write about sexy topics in the vernacular, as shown by the author of Hypnerotomochia Poliphili, one of the most famous books of the Renaissance, but the results were not sexy, because the Italian was in a ponderously Latinate style. Sexy sentences got to have rhythm. As Rowland wonderfully describes what I, not she, call the Renaissance of the Sentence, (but my description owes all to her interpretation of the historical record), Castiglione wrote in a manner that “set standards for vernacular style: like the building blocks of a classical temple, the subordinate clauses interlock, one after another, to construct the sonorous bulk of Castiglione’s monumental run-on sentences.” Castiglione brings “epic muscularity” of Michelangelo’s sculpture into sentence construction. The writers of the Renaissance had figured out what made Ancient writing click, and they’d found a way to do it on their own.

What I’m saying is that the first step to re-establishing the essay as the standard in humanistic writing is to reinvigorate the sentences we write, so that, when one reads an essay, one feels it. One feels it the way one tastes — and here I’m going global — a good curry. It really sets you back. Or maybe forward. Style, maniera, modo is what we readers demand. The humanists of the Renaissance knew the Romans had the ability to put sentences that had concinnitas, but that their ancestors in what we call the Middle Ages had lost that ability. When the Ancients constructed the Arch of Constantine, it stayed together for centuries, even though neglected. Concinnity — what a splendid word!

It seems to me that when bad styling of sentences became accepted, we got used to it. We compensated for the lack of quality and impact of the sentences that people wrote as evidence of their scholarly abilities by asking them for more of them in the hopes we could get the same buzz going that we used to get from fewer sentences. Last year I ran a panel at the Modern Language Association on “Slow Reading,” and today I’m advocating slow writing. Editors are in the position to make this change take place.

Now, I can hear you saying: Who am I to think I can turn the academic world around?

I suggest that what we in scholarly publishing — books and journals — need to do is to simultaneously go down-market and upscale. I am also an editor for a journal, a member of the editorial board of the Duke University Press journal boundary 2. We decided to change our policies to deal with a whole set of changes that have beset the academic world since 1989. Before I talk about the specifics of the changes in policy, I ask you to step back to take in the bigger picture. It’s important to see our moment in historical perspective from the Oil Crisis of 1973-4, which had a profound effect on university libraries, until 1989-2001. Because of the oil crisis of the early 70s, librarians cut back drastically on purchasing books but maintained journal subscriptions. As a result some publishers decided they could raise prices on serials with impunity. It was license to print money. The result radically distorted university library budgets.
After September 11th the universities finally decided they could reduce purchases of journals as much as they’d cut back on books. I’m talking about general trends. Of course, there are exceptions to what I’m saying. The development of electronic forms of publication provided the justification for the cutbacks. There was a sense that if a library switched its purchasing to electronic media, it was not really cutting back, because there were alternative avenues for publication. This was partly true, but in the meantime, there was a growing sense that educators needed to be policed better and given measuring sticks for productivity. Thus, the demand for books increased even at the time the budgets for purchasing books were slashed. And libraries were appropriately looking for opportunities to cut subscriptions to print journals that were perceived as unnecessary.

Journal editors felt the need to rethink what they were doing to make themselves seem more essential, less cuttable. In the meantime, the good intellectual and academic times that ran from the late 60s were over. The wonderful flowering of new theories in almost every field of academic endeavor had run their course. In literary studies, for example, the great excitement of theory had mutated into the police state tactics of the New Historicism that in fact often focussed on policing, setting rules, enforcing market conditions. So it was not a time for developing new journals and readers’ interests were waning. When people did not understand de Man and Foucault, there was interest in essays by scholars telling readers they’d finally come to understand these gurus of the postmodern, but this sort of thing gets stale. It got really stale. And we found our pages filling with careerists eager to add another line to the cv. Jonathan Arac, one of the lead editors of boundary 2, describes the new policy for acquisitions for the journal in these simple terms: We decided to serve our readers more than our contributors. Paul Bove summarizes the changes in the journal editorial policy as consisting of four criteria:

1. ordinary language, not jargon
2. essays first, scholarly articles second
3. application of the “cui bono?” test to all submissions
4. contents of journal must educate the readers and serve the audience, not the careers of the writers

We must, he said to me, appeal to the curiosity of the reader and recover the right to use the word “stupid” as a judgment call.

A journal, hopefully, stretches on and on. Editorial principles will change if the journal stays as flexible and fluid as the sentences that we hope will appear in it. It should be structured to make the needs of the readers primary, those needs as imagined by the editors in an act of empathy and political responsibility. How could one set up a journal or any publication where essays were being gathered in order to make them command respect. We have some work to do on this at boundary 2, but we are trying to demand more of ourselves in order to give more to readers.

I am involved in a project now where the essay is the monarch, where we have set up editorial procedures to push us, the editors, to publish the best essays, and that is my book, forthcoming in Fall 2009, called The New Literary History of the United States, whose chief editors are Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. In publishing it’s always about how to rig things for the best results, knowing there’s going to be a lot of resistance coming in from every which way. The book depends on the chief editors and the members of the editorial board leaning on the best people they know to contribute. But having done that, how can you be demanding? Beggars can be choosers, I say!! We set up the editorial procedures to make sure the personal loyalty of the
editors to contributors doesn’t interfere with the loyalty of the publication to its readers. I’ve been through this twice before with the French and German literary histories in 1989 and 2004, but I think we’ve improved things! Working with my chief editors who have each had a lot of experience editing the work of others, we set the editorial procedures up to fight the lazy writing habits that has entered the academic world over the last decades.

When Edward Said predicted the decline of writing by professors in the early 1980s, I did not believe him; but he was right and I was wrong. A lot of bad habits developed, and now they are protected by power by those who write poorly who have now risen in rank as a result of what I called “social passing” in educational levels above the primary and secondary schools. We had fights and had to have emergency meetings of the board for Hollier’s *New History of French Literature* because, although Hollier was demanding and so were we at Harvard University Press, some members of the board did not think we had the right to make professors revise to the degree that every page would be readable.

What an outrage! I remember the would-be contributor whom we were demanding more of who said “But I’ve written the perfect New Historicist, feminist, deconstructionist essay. You dare not tamper with my very self and voice. And we dared not tell Professor Polonius that he did not have any writing voice at all. You cannot be comical-pastoral-tragical (I am playing on what Polonius says at *Hamlet* 2.2.397.) and speak in any tongue in which humans have spoken. We nearly turned down an entry by one of the chief editors of that book. With the Marcus/Sollors I confess to having stacked things towards readability by making one of the founding editors of Rolling Stone be one of the two editors-in-chief of the volume. Guilty as charged. The way I have set up the Marcus/Sollors is all around the essay. The book is a collection of 220 essays that resonate in surprising ways so that the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts, but each individual part is a free-standing essay. In the making of this book I have pursued the essay so strongly that I have made it function in a new way like an individual instrument in Alexander’s Ragtime Band.

If we want change to happen so that essays become the norm of scholarly publication for tenure for junior people, then we will have to make it happen. It is in our power, but it will not happen unless we make a concerted effort. We need to make changes in our journals, as I described we did with *boundary 2* and the Marcus/Sollors. We need to do what we might fear will be dumbing down our publications by insisting upon clearer language set forth in rhythmical sentence. The reason for the persistence of gobbledy-gook is that it’s a lot easier to hide mediocre thinking under the cloak of gobbledy-gook. If we insist upon clarity, we will miss those moments of professional “stuplimity” (to use my dear author Sianne Ngai’s word) caused by the deep unclarity of the sort we get from Zizek. But we’ll win back readers. We want to publish writings people will talk about.

The real, dirty secret of academic publishing, as a daring author of a letter to the editor of *Nature* had the courage to say, is that it’s too easy to get published nowadays: “Let’s admit it... one can publish just about anything if one goes low enough down the list of impact factors,” wrote Vladimir Svetlov of the Department of Microbiogology at Ohio State University. There are procedures for refereeing and they make some difference in an international context (this is going to be a bigger and bigger issue in the years to come), but those procedures don’t in and of themselves guarantee anything. In fact, where I hear people talk the most about journals edited according to international standards for refereeing, it often attached to mediocre publications and is a reason for excluding from counting towards one’s record publication in
A good journal has a direction, a mission and scholarly goals. The for-profit publishers know how to set up a journal that gets credibility in the most facile way possible. It has become harder to make money from journals since September 11th. The old tricks won’t work, but the authorities in the universities have not adjusted to them and in some way they feed into them, feed into the undermining of scholarly standards. The profit motive undermines true credibility of many scholarly journals. I have been clipping the articles from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other papers that document the assault on the authority of scholarly journals by a number of for-profit operations. It has become a lot more dangerous to edit a scholarly journal, especially in the medical sciences where there is big money to lose when the claims for a Big Pharma product are contested by a scientist. I have a big sheaf of such essays gathered over the last three years. All this would be bad enough were it not that papers like the *Wall Street Journal* also run essays by — what is the right word for it? — people like Professor Thomas P. Stossel of the Harvard Medical School saying that scholarly journals “are magazines,” no better than the magazines you find in the grocery store with no more authority than such publications. The pull-quote from the essay reads: “Why are scientific journals regarded with such reverence?” This shameful screed was meant to undermine scholarly journals. To say the least such talk is of no help in the effort I am encouraging to bring more authority back to the scholarly journal.

We live at a time when I can see that a whole series of great developments are emerging in philosophy, literary studies, and other fields. We are on the verge of great things, and they are apparent in a number of articles appearing in journals and some of the projects have developed far enough to merit publication in book form. But these are also desperate times for many, a time of uncertainty and false prophets. Now, Mr. Zizek is about to be shut up by a whole set of people who are tired of hearing him blab his mouth. About time! But, look, it’s America: There are still a lot of snake oil salesmen ready to try to convince you that up is down. Beware! As we prepare for the next thirty years we need to re-find our foundations, to re-establish learning on the best foundations, and the best one of all is the sentence that the Renaissance reinvigorated. A sentence is not like a laundry line on which we pin words so they can flap in the wind. No, a sentence “is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung.”

Will the Internet, will Google destroy the scholarly journal? Will blogs spell the end of little magazines? I hope not. Look at N + 1. There’s no authority in being disseminated by the Internet in and of itself. As Benjamin wrote of technology, it is is a force for good and ill; all depends on humans subordinating the tool to human needs. The iron we smelt we can use to make railway tracks that bring us together and movie cameras we use to make art that brings us together. Or that metal can be made into bullets and bombers. It is up to us. The tools don’t determine our course. That’s why we have to go back to fundamentals, to the sentence, to judgment — it’s no surprise those words can mean the same thing — to reassure others, and more importantly, ourselves that what we do is essential. Against the bluster and braggadocio of a Zizek and so many other boastful denizens of the Roaring Nineties, let us affect the modesty that seems to be endemic to the essay!
I'm working on a server that reads the '% CPU' and 'Available memory' from PerformanceCounters. It works good on my development machine. But on actual servers, it is really slow to read from these two PerformanceCounters. at least at the first two read operations. It can take up to 4-6 minutes performing the code below: Stopwatch watch = new Stopwatch(); I'm not sure what kinds of transformations on the data you're doing as it's being written, it doesn't look like much, but for whatever reason it is significantly slowing down the writing of files. I've got files that are ~0.5-1 GB that I... Have a question about this project? Sign up for a free GitHub account to open an issue and contact its maintainers and the community. Pick a username. Email Address. Password. Sign up for GitHub. By clicking "Sign up for GitHub", you agree to our terms of service and privacy statement. We'll occasionally send you account related emails. Already on GitHub? Sign in to your account. Jump to bottom. Writing large files is slow #4. Closed. serialhex opened this issue Jan 18, 2017 · 11 comments. Closed. Writing large files is slow #4. Slow writing is a discipline of waiting. A discipline of silence. A discipline of thoughtfulness. Releasing the temptation of Task (with a capital "T") fills us with guilt in the beginning because we aren't "doing" anything. Talk about slow writing! I've often felt guilty that I can't write content I'm happy with faster. It took me 4 years to write Cain, and even afterward, when my editor Mrs. Hanemann got her hands on it, we went through many volleys back and forth. Made me wonder what all that time was for. But now, when I look back and read Cain in its finished form, I feel as though every word is exactly what it should be. I don't think that would have happened without taking the time to SEE the story and characters in so much detail. PS: Tosca Lee is an incredible writer.