

University of Adelaide Press

Launch, 23 October 2009

There is a rhetorical strategy, used by prosecutors in law-courts in Roman times, which works roughly as follows.

“Marcus Publius Maro is before us charged with defaulting on a debt of two hundred sesterces. Defaulting on a debt: that is the offence with which he is charged. Therefore I am not going to mention that two years ago, in a court in Ostia, this same Marcus Publius Maro was convicted of falsifying his grandmother’s will. Nor am I going to mention that he used his influence among certain senators to get his brother an appointment as governor of Numea, a province whose public coffers he and his brother then proceeded to empty. No, I am going to concentrate solely on the charge before us, namely that he has evaded repaying a contracted debt.”

The matter before us today is the launch of a splendid new enterprise, the University of Adelaide Press, which will devote itself to publishing in electronic form books by members of the University’s academic staff, as well as, under the Barr Smith imprint, books related to the University itself and its history.

Here are a few of the matters I will not be mentioning.

First, the history of “Publish or Perish” and its impact on the academy over the past sixty-odd years, culminating in the effort, first in the United Kingdom and then in certain other countries, including Australia, that took their lead from the United Kingdom to produce quantitative measures of so-called research output and then to allocate funding to universities on the basis of such measures.

Included in such a history would be some reflection on why the unit of research output came to be standardized as the research article, by single or multiple authors, leaving the single-author book, which in the minds of humanities scholars had always been the gold standard, more or less sidelined.

In its widest form such an historical account would have to reflect on why in the late twentieth century the reduction of objective judgments to quantifiable judgments, objectivity to quantifiability, should have been allowed to spread into the academy, where there were surely enough historians to point out the turn toward quantification was a recent development with not much of an intellectual pedigree, and enough lawyers to remind people that the law, in its wisdom, had never fallen for the lure of the quantifiable – had never assigned numerical weights, for example, to items of evidence; and where there were mathematicians too, who – as a last resort– would have been able to devise better metrics for the judgment of research output than the rudimentary arithmetical measures settled on by the bureaucrats.

Another topic I will not be raising is the growth and decline – a galloping decline in our day – of university presses, presses whose *raison d'être* has been to publish learned books for sale to scholars and academic libraries, and the concomitant rise of commercially driven publishers specializing in academic books and periodicals, which are written and edited for them for free by men and women whose careers depend on their generating research output, and which they then sell at astronomical prices to the captive market of those same academic libraries.

The last topic I will not be raising is the failure, on the whole – there are of course many splendid exceptions – of scholars in the humanities and social sciences to defend themselves competently against the assault on their enterprise that commenced around 1980 and was in essence political and ideological. By and large, the universities that housed these scholars failed to protect them, failing to appreciate, until it was too late, the scale of the attack that was taking place on their own autonomy. The humanities and social sciences in particular received one crippling blow after another, as a result of which they are in the position they occupy today: faculties that had once been the core of that peculiarly Western, Christian cum classical institution the university have become outliers.

All in all, a rather doleful picture, not just for scholars struggling to produce a volume of output that will be acceptable to the bureaucrats while at the same time attending to the needs of ever-growing numbers of client-students and also – thanks to the invention of the desktop computer – doing all the time-consuming

administrative tasks that used to be done by secretaries, but for our civilization as a whole, in its present hapless dip phase, as it turns its back on that function within itself – that *faculty* within itself – best qualified to reinvigorate it by returning it to first questions and first principles.

Into the picture strides the University of Adelaide Press. For the foreseeable future the Press will confine itself to publishing books by members of this University's academic staff. Though it will consider, and send out for refereeing, manuscripts in a wide range of academic disciplines, we can expect that it will be of benefit mainly to scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

The Press will publish in electronic format. However, printed and bound copies of its books will be available on demand, at a very reasonable price, manufactured right here in Adelaide and dispatched the same day they are ordered. I have seen examples of the work of Griffin Press: they really are very attractive, and sturdily bound too, in no way inferior to the products of regular book printers.

From the way I am talking you will realize that I belong to a generation brought up on books, on the products of the Gutenberg revolution, a generation that accepted without question that printed books would for ever be the repository of the best that humankind had thought and said. I find it hard, I confess, to get rid of a prejudice in favour of what I think of as real books, books that you can hold in your hand and put on your shelf and don't

need batteries to read, and against virtual books, intangible, their text digitally coded and held in an anonymous bank somewhere.

Nevertheless, there are no two ways about it: we have arrived at a real crisis in academic publishing. University presses are going to dwindle and in many cases fold unless they turn to the cheaper option of electronic publishing. Similarly, for scholars in the humanities and social sciences, particularly scholars at the beginning of their career, the choice is more and more going to be between putting out the books they write in electronic format or not publishing in book form at all.

In such a context we cannot but welcome the arrival of the enterprise of the University of Adelaide, which this year becomes – if I count correctly – the fifth Australian university to initiate a program of electronic publishing. I have one tentative word of advice to the editors of the Press. It is important that the Press, and electronic book-publishing in general, not come to be seen as an avenue of last resort, as the publisher of books that no one else will pick up. It is important that it maintain standards as high as, or even higher than, Australian university presses of yore. It is important not only to maintain such standards but to be seen to maintain them.

With those parting words, let me declare the University of Adelaide Press well and truly launched, and let us now celebrate.

J M Coetzee

