

OTHER THINGS EQUAL

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“To Burn Always with a Hard, Gemlike Flame,” Eh, Professor?

Academic life, like any other, has a full in-box. A professor can stay busy answering his mail. Professors, after all, are employed by bureaucracies, and it is the way of bureaucracies to generate tasks to fill the time allotted. The committees of a modern college or university grow yearly. They are too many and too large by a factor of about three but you can make a career on them, attending to what appears to be your duty. And they are socially pleasant. Serving on a committee is a chance to get to know your colleagues, a chance strangely rare in academic life.

The requests that come from outside by mail or phone or e-mail grow steadily. Some grow because colleges are part of the 20 percent or so of national income, above the 40 percent now supplying alleged goods and services at some level of government, in the course of being absorbed by the Federal government without actually becoming governmental offices. Will the professor kindly fill out this report of how he spent his time, suitably jiggered to keep the Feds happy? The time of professors at *other* universities is a common pool, allowing academic institutions to become careless in exploiting. Will he kindly be one of a dozen or so people solicited to write meaningless letters of recommendation, interpretable only by the people in the identical field who know that Ken Arrow always exaggerates or that Stan Engerman always understates, but read by committees of people in other fields who know nothing of this?

I am not recommending irresponsibility. Some refereeing needs to be done, and who better to do it than you or me? Some committees need to meet, even though the VP will then do what she already planned to do. Most first-class mail, and even some third-class, warrants a reply, if only a scribbled note on the bottom. Books should be reviewed. The students must be graded. I seldom miss a class, even for really important matters like drinking with my buddies at conventions.

I affirm that many bureaucratic jobs really do need to be done, and that it is shameful not to do them when asked, if you can. Everyone with gifts that way should be chair of the department for a while, crummy though the job is (it is like being a foreman in a factory — neither labor nor management, chewed up by both). The work has to be done. The journals do have to be edited (though the task would be lighter if we did not need ten pieces for tenure). I still growl at a friend who has twice turned down the editorship of the *Journal of Economic History* for what seem selfish reasons. He is willing to take honors from the profession but not to do the dirty work. And yet.

Harry Johnson and Robert Mundell are paired in my mind, both at Chicago in the early 1970s. Both were Canadians, both heavy drinkers, both world-famous in trade theory. Harry was the most responsible academic I have known, the very soul of professional care. His capacity for routine work was amazing. I came into the Department once on a Saturday morning to find him with a file of fifty Ph.D. core examinations on one side of the desk and a full bottle of scotch on the other. When I left a few hours later the pile and the scotch, both finished, had traded positions. Johnson inspired hundreds of other economists, traveling incessantly to universities off the main track, commenting on everyone's work, synthesizing, editing, teaching (his classes were models of preparation and clarity), attending committees (while opening his mail, all of which he answered promptly), running the invisible college. Bob Mundell, on the other hand, is among the least responsible academics I have known (the competition is stiff). His office at Chicago looked like the result of a terrorist bombing. He never prepared classes. He was the editor of the *JPE* for a while, but was so negligent that Harry had to take over and straighten things up. And yet.

If you are going to do creative work, whether in the library or the classroom, you have to cherish the flame. You have to protect it from the puffing of bureaucracy. The examples from art are impressive, the most extreme case being Gauguin, who one day (it is said: the true story must be more complicated) left his bureaucracy and his family for a life of painting in Tahiti. That is a terrible thing to do, morally indefensible. And yet.

The literary critic Edmund Wilson late in life had a postcard printed up, which he would use to reply to requests not relevant to his current projects. It said "Edmund Wilson regrets that he does not (1) Write testimonials for books, (2) Attend conferences, (3) Comment on unsolicited manuscripts," and so on through the dozen ways of snuffing the flame. He would check off the relevant item and drop it in the mail to the person soliciting him. The technique is harsh but you see the point.

My mentor early in graduate school was John Meyer, whose graduate course in transportation economics I had taken as a senior in college. He supported me for a couple of summers, and in part during the year, in exchange for incompetent assistance on the economics of slavery and the Colombian Transport Project. I saw him as an academic entrepreneur, more businesslike than most professors. But "businesslike" does not mean "methodical, orderly, time-keeping." The word is "businesslike," not "bureaucracy-like." It is what foreign academics can learn from American academics, using the best values of a commercial civilization for the study of economics or Greek.

Meyer's force and business reminded me of my grandfather, an electrical contractor in Michigan. I noticed in particular that Meyer was ruthless about his research time, as an electrical contractor had better be ruthless about his wiring time. One day for example I was standing in Meyer's office waiting to be told what to do (research assistants are like that, unfortunately) when his secretary Marina brought in a new book from the mail. Meyer tore open the package, turned at once to the index, scanned the pages he had looked up, and tossed the book aside, probably forever. In retrospect it's possible he was looking up (1) his own name and (2) sex.

But at the time it struck me as an emblem of how a businesslike scholar works. Get right to the point. Dig out what you need. Don't read books; use them. From Meyer I learned to use the books relevant to a particular project.

Read for pleasure, use for work. Since then I've rarely read a nonfiction book cover to cover, though I've used thousands of books. As it was put by Francis Bacon: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few [very few, and mainly if written by your scientific opponents] to be chewed and digested." Good advice (though from a scoundrel, it should be noted: Bacon was for instance the last man to use torture in England for official purposes).

My other mentor in graduate school, Alexander Gerschenkron, made his first impression on many people through his office, another lesson in cherishing the flame. It was an appalling mess, books and papers piled high, a long tunnel of stacked tomes to the desk itself, bottles of brandy littered within reach (he had a heart condition). Gerschenkron claimed that he knew where everything was because once a year he spent a day going through the stacks. It was one of the great messes of academic life. The prize in this regard goes in fact to Leo Goodman, the sociologist and statistician at Chicago whose office had, when I saw it, a ton of unopened mail covering the entire floor, tilting up to the walls at the angle of repose of mail. Al Harberger's office at Chicago, despite work of a super secretary, Elyce Monroe, was only an order of magnitude of two below Goodman's on the entropy scale. Gerschenkron's lay somewhere between Harberger's and Goodman's.

The messy academic offices make the point. These were brilliantly creative people, masters of their field and beyond. The moral is given by a joke: "If a messy desk is a sign of a messy mind, what's an empty desk the sign of?" I recently saw at the University of Virginia the office of Ralph Cohen, a great student of literature, and it reminded me so strongly of Gerschenkron's that I told him so. Cohen, Gerschenkron, and the rest did not waste time being neat about inessentials. They were neat when it mattered, for this footnote or that equation — and then fanatically neat, willing to go to absurd lengths of precision — but not as a rule in matters far from the creative flame. Being neat about inessentials is like attending all committees and answering all mail or, in the modern mode, reading the manual from start to finish before starting up the computer. In the way of John Meyer, Gerschenkron was businesslike and neat when it mattered, for compiling a table on Russian agriculture in the late nineteenth century or for writing English better than most native English speakers. But for the rest, well: clean up in a dull moment.

"To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life," said the English critic Walter Pater a century ago. Heady stuff, but also soberly correct. Routine science is satisfactory, and pays the bills. The bureaucracies that pay us must be served. Yet we should each of us cherish our hard, gemlike flame, however small, it is our success in the scientific or teaching life. Neglect the committee that is not accomplishing anything; avoid the student who is merely buttering you up; do not respond to the Nth request for a recommendation of a colleague you don't know or care about. Or, to be exact and economic, watch for the opportunity cost in cherished flame forgone.