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JIL: The Response

I visited an old friend last month who, now retired after thirty-some years as an English professor at the University of Wyoming, reiterated to me the same words of wisdom he's been spouting for decades: "Nothing much ever really changes in this damned profession--the old problems just get recycled." "This is pure Beckettian sentiment," I countered. "It's Hamm in *Endgame* professing his ardor for the 'same old questions, same old answers,'" an allusion that only made my drinking buddy even more intransigent. The topic that had elicited this beery cynicism was the plight of adjunct faculty, but it applies equally well to certain kinds of job announcements posted in that annual October tome: the MLA's Job Information List (JIL). The same old questions of demanding costly materials from applicants at the earliest stages of the process, the same old inadequate answers.

These musty questions actually pertain to a matter far more important than my little Beckettian hobbyhorse: namely, the premise that the Modern Language Association, as announced in the December 1997 "Final Report" of its Committee on Professional Employment, "might have a further role to play [in the job process] beyond its current dissemination of good-practice guidelines in the Job Information List" (36). What is this "further role"? The recommendation, couched in the shortest section of the entire report, is, I believe, intentionally ambiguous, as a close reading can yield only two possibilities: 1. the MLA should "act as a clearinghouse for information about problems in hiring procedures"; 2. the MLA, as announced in the section's heading, might instigate the "Collection and Publication of Information about Hiring-Procedure Problems Confronted by Job-Seekers" (36). Clearinghouses gather; publishers publish. Which is it? And, of course, a more important question remains about what constitutes a "problem" egregious enough to report, especially at so preliminary a stage of the process as the job announcements in the October issue of the JIL.

Some years ago, Cary Nelson and I in separate letters to the *MLA Newsletter* (the Summer 1995 and Spring 1996 issues, respectively) had the temerity to suggest that departments should be prohibited from ordering dossiers and full writing samples at the initial stages of screening. Nelson argued that a cover letter, vita, and dissertation abstract were adequate data for making preliminary decisions; after these are made, committees could then order dossiers and full writing samples (now, of course, more hiring committees are also requesting teaching materials). Nelson's recommendation was based on two self-evident facts: first, that dossiers and writing samples cost many job-seekers hundreds of dollars to reproduce and mail; and, second, that many committees will never, ever get around to reading all these writing samples in the first place.

This latter rationale offended some readers, and two rose to challenge Nelson's position. One, formerly the chair of English at UCLA, contended that his hiring committees "found it to be no problem--although certainly it is a burden--to read such samples in October and November." Further, he argued, requiring all candidates to submit writing samples "lessens" the impact of other "undemocratic markers such as where the candidate goes to school and who writes in the dossier" (*MLA Newsletter*, Fall 1995: 18). Graduates of undistinguished programs get a fairer shake, it seems, if they are required to submit more materials earlier.

These arguments proved too much for me, so I wrote to the *MLA Newsletter* to rebut them. Asked to revise my letter five times by MLA editors, I was finally satisfied the Newsletter would run it in its final form (earlier versions, to be fair, had exceeded published length requirements).

Then came the call. Phyllis Franklin had my letter vetted by the MLA's crack "legal staff" and two sentences had to be stricken, both of which concerned the, uh, veracity of the UCLA-man's claims. The first of these, based upon my experiences chairing a committee the year before which received over 500 applications, asked if a committee could actually "read" all those writing samples with "no problem." Teach your classes, try to do your own work, enjoy what passes for a personal life in this profession, and then add a couple of hundred essays to read. No problem? Are you kidding? The sentence had to be deleted, I was advised, because I had no unimpeachable evidence that the committee did not read all those essays. Let's be straight about this: nobody who has ever sat on a search committee that received hundreds of applications read all those essays. Not even close. Because nobody in her right mind who was unimpressed by a candidate's letter, vita, and dissertation abstract would say, "Oh, well, maybe this exposition of the "Children's Hour" segment of *Finnegans Wake* will change my mind."

It just doesn't happen. The landfill just gets bigger.

My second sentence about more democratic hiring had to be omitted too; after all, the published list of a department's faculty only indicates who was hired, not who was interviewed. Since I didn't know who the committee interviewed, or where they got their degrees, I didn't know how spectacularly democratic the whole thing was. Right. People spend all this money just for the privilege of an interview? Who gets hired doesn't matter?

An interview without a job to follow is like. . . . Fill in your favorite analogy.

I was allowed, however, to take issue with the department chair's final salvo: "A policy of refusing to print requests for writing samples and dossiers. . . to a fit a preference by the Delegate Assembly or the Executive Council would set a foolish precedent. . . . We have no desire to make other schools conform to our procedures, and we should not be required to conform to theirs" (18). 11. Wrong. It is precisely the business of a truly professional organization to enforce ethical and humane procedures--and the "Final Report" of the Committee on Professional Employment says as much.

So, how is it that we are still more or less where we were four years ago? How is that dozens of schools are still requiring job candidates to mail expensive and unnecessary materials for an initial screening? To be sure, as even a cursory glance at the October 1999 online JIL indicates, a number of departments--the English departments at Case Western Reserve, Kansas State, SMU, Cal-State Fullerton, and many others--are quite sensitive to the issue of placing undue expense on applicants and state explicitly that dossiers and other materials will be requested only after a preliminary screening. By setting deadlines judiciously and organizing their searches carefully, such departments can make informed choices without extorting money from graduate student applicants.

It ain't magic and it ain't brain surgery. It just takes a little planning and a firm commitment from committee members to work diligently and ethically.

Of course, many schools aren't capable of planning a search carefully--and ethics? Well, sometimes that is in short supply as well. Some search committees want everything but the kitchen sink up front. And I'm not talking about committees working at poor schools either, or departments where tight budgets mean minimal secretarial support, thus minimal ability to contact applicants and request further materials. Over the years, these schools have included almost every major English department in the University of California system, and this year is pretty much the same: Berkeley, Irvine, San Diego, and so on. And let's

not forget Canadian schools either: Toronto, Victoria, Ottawa, British Columbia, Simon Fraser.

Too much time spent surfing or drinking Molson, and not enough time to attend to the details of a search? Don't know--can't explain it.

Private, well-heeled schools often need everything up front too. This year that means Cornell, Duke, Sarah Lawrence, Bryn Mawr, and a bunch of others. And so do a few large public Research One schools like Ohio State, Oregon, and South Carolina, which should know better. Some departments, like the English department at Trinity University in San Antonio, want, well, more stuff than I've ever seen or heard of: dossier, vita, dissertation abstract, transcripts, statement of teaching philosophy, teaching evaluations(!), and so on. One school wants a "statement of deepest intellectual concerns," while another wants a short essay "regarding teaching philosophy and multicultural experience/expertise."

Of course, if last year is any indication, a number of departments will likely follow the lead of one particularly abusive Ivy League school in shifting significant expenses on to the "lucky" few who pass the initial review of applications. This department called one of my former students in late November and demanded that he FEDEX three copies of a writing sample, which he did. Two weeks later they asked for another writing sample, also to be sent by overnight mail. He complied again.

Good news--a distinguished department is interested in your application. Bad news--the application will cost you nearly \$60.00 when adding the cost of a dossier, xeroxing, and two bulky overnight mailings. Graduate students who take home \$600 a month can't really afford too much of this sort of attention or interest, as flattering as it might be. Is it possible that an institution with billions of dollars in its endowment can't afford to xerox application materials? Or maybe this department's distinguished faculty are above worrying about such trifles?

Trifles? A carrot or turnip can make all the difference. Just ask Didi and Gogo. This October's JIL presents some of the same old questions. But do the MLA and its membership have the wherewithal to work on creating new answers?