

Makeshift Works

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My initial response to Tubb's piece was a feeling that it optimized the decadent quality of academic writing as metawriting. That it was too caught up in ivory tower notions disconnected from the structural characteristics of capitalist academic publishing and the capitalist university. I asked, who is the audience for this writing, beyond himself? On second reading, I took quite a different view. While Tubb may indulge in tropes that romanticize academic labour as special and artisanal, his argument is essentially for a moral economy of writing that embraces a range of others as peers, with a focus on the dialogical process, over and above the final product. As such, it is a counterpoint to the one-way production process from "raw idea" to "finished article," ready for market, that characterizes capitalist academic publishing. I would add that this linear production story was always at odds with the messy historicity and materiality of production processes in general, and more specifically, the production of creative works, including expository prose writing, Tubb's focus. As such, I find Tubb a worthwhile read.

Given Tubb's description of scholarly writing as, "making words external to ourselves that we can work with our thoughts and make them better," I take some license here to indulge in a materialist concept of writing. Here writing is not a linear process, but rather a deeply cyclical, temporal mode of circulating ideas across networks or communities of peers in dialogue, each tinkering towards a never-finished product. Writing is then a process whose aim is to provide the materials for further work in subsequent production cycles. Contrary to this idea, according to Tubb, we have the standard formula of academic writing and publishing as a background to the predicament of publish and/or perish. Nominally, such work achieves the allocation of scarce academic resources, privileging values determined in the "market for ideas." In this regard, we could frame Tubb's theory of intellectual production as a gift he received from the classical political economists, who were interested in how

values that arose from human labour were crystallized in products, during the process of production across repeated economic cycles over time. That is, far more than they were interested in the transitory fluctuations in prices, of ideas, or widgets, or whatever. As with Tubb's story, there are really no finished products to be found, just an ongoing process of transformation as materials circulate from one tinkerer to the next. An academic publisher's nightmare, perhaps.

What Tubb articulates is a pragmatism that decouples a textual process of churning over truth from the beauty that may emerge in its products. He suggests a less rationalist, less engineered approach to life and writing, including the writing we manage within days, across seasons, over time. This is a fresh and generative approach to the craft of writing that rejects both the bureaucratic codification and quantification of writing for students and academics alike. Tubb has identified and rejected the self-defeating, formulaic, CV-centric modes of writing promoted in the academic market, as a residue of a particular end-stage of print capitalism within the academic sphere.

Whether or not a new age of makeshift craft in writing is at hand, the burning question may not be so much about a different ideology of writing, but rather the enduring structures deeply ingrained in the bureaucratic and labour processes of the contemporary capitalist university. This is quite a banal point, I know. But it might lead to a variation on Tubb's suggestion for an antidote. Tubb suggests that by materializing a less formulaic kind of writing practice, we can locally and situationally foster radical creativity in spaces that would otherwise produce intellectual zombies or clones. That we have the potential to enact a kind of creative agency left to us as teachers, students, and writers. I would only add that while this Makeshift ideology of writing may provide a frame for such creative work, we might think here of Bourdieu's point that all aesthetic production has material conditions of possibility. Making space for makeshift finishing will require new practices for makeshift coalitions that hold universities accountable for the forms of alienation and economic injustice that they continue to foster, while also preserving the sense of playfulness and possibility that are the entropic promise of all Makeshift works.