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# Mother Goose, Mother Boards, & Museums



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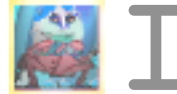
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*Whether it's cold, or whether it's hot  
There's going to be weather, whether or not.*

IT STILL SEEMS TO ME that Mother Goose is in charge of publicity on behalf of those who dream of things digital. I first suspected as much when, a few years ago, I began to see television commercials with little English girls dressed in black, ankle deep in fog, and spinning round, through somewhat vague metaphors suggesting a journey toward something marvelous (well, at least toward something new, which for most people is recommendation enough). Since then we have had everything from corporate talking walls to that peculiar twentieth-century creation calling itself *postmodern*, telling us that all that came before was but prelude, that this is the moment of our creation. For all of it, though, we cannot say if we are headed for the digital Promised Land or merely passing through an electronic Erebus on our way to Virtual Hades. Our confidence, it seems, relies utterly on the Goosian suggestion that "There's going to be weather, whether or not."

Clearly, the technical phase of the digital revolution is a *fait accompli*. We are now entering the planning and building phase, which, to borrow a parallel from John Reed's account of the Mexican Revolution, is the process by which the whole mess degenerates into a government. We are going to have things digital, whether or not; what remains in doubt is the cost, the shape of its content, and the character of its purposes. And, as with all revolutions, we find that the parties who are united in cause with respect to the grand vision are at serious odds concerning particulars.

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*There was an old woman called Nothin'-at-all,*

*Who lived in a house exceedingly small;  
A man who was not very comely or tall,  
stretched his mouth to its utmost extent,  
And downed in a gulp—old woman, house and all.*

The tension between the aesthetic department and the business department, not surprisingly, is palpable at this juncture. The business department would like very much to exploit for profit certain holdings of the aesthetic department. The aesthetic department, interested in finding new sources of revenue, would like to find ways to be accommodating, but fears, as it has been suggested by many, a loss of control. Behind those fears, too, is a history of relationships with the business department that have not always been satisfactory. The aesthetic department, after all, is part of the larger intellectual estate that has suffered serious losses at the hands of the planning structure (that loose but effective coordination between business, government and public sentiment).

The most injurious losses occurred on college and university campuses back in the early 1970s when the arts and humanities were all but abandoned and, with them, their associated programs and institutions. Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith gives space to those events in his *New Industrial State*. I will quote just a few significant lines:

The great prestige of the pure and applied sciences and mathematics in modern times and the support accorded them reflect the needs of the technostucture...whereas the lesser prestige and lesser support for the arts and humanities suggests their inferior role.... No modern university administrator would insist...that the study of theatre, fine arts, or *Beowulf* had the same claim to funds in the same amounts as an electronic accelerator or the computer center. Such is the influence of the planning system.

I would only add that the events described by Galbraith very quickly reached beyond college and university campuses to touch foundations, federal arts and humanities programs, orchestras large and small, opera and dance companies, individual artists and writers of every sort, and, of course, museums.

• • •

*Charley Wag, Charley Wag,  
Ate the pudding and left the bag.*

Not coincidentally, it was back in the 1970s that there was a big push by government and business to get the aesthetic department to look more business-like, to adopt business management models for its institutions, and to move away from a reliance on public support and look instead to more private and corporate sponsorship, coupled, naturally, with revenue-producing programs. The efforts to comply were interesting, to say the least. A friend of mine, then dean of the College of Humanities at the University of California, Riverside, was watching all of this activity when he was invited to give the annual research lecture to the UCR faculty. He had planned to do something on William Blake, but instead offered a eulogy for the arts and humanities. One moving passage in particular shows the discomfort felt by a member of the aesthetic department in the face of pressures to become more business-like. I will abbreviate as best I can, but I do not want to lose the flavor:

...of greater concern to me here is an underlying, even desperate quest for and drive toward certainties, toward human management rather than human enhancement, toward strategies rather than passion, toward clear-sightedness rather than vision.... We can all recognize, without derogating, that science, for example (and its emulators in the area of social concern), is a quite different and more salable pursuit than, say, the reading of poetry.

It is worth noting that the percentage of the gross national product that today goes to support arts and humanities programs and institutions, at least in the United States of America, remains about where it has always been—a point below minuscule. Becoming business-like has not always produced the predicted results. The aesthetic department continues to be the Blanche Dubois of the national planning scheme, relying as ever “on the kindness of strangers.” Moreover, when the stranger happens to be a corporation, the act of kindness sometimes lacks the full flavor of

philanthropy.

This is highly relevant history, and it needs to be in the minds of those in both departments who will sit down to discuss the shape and character of our involvement in digital programs. As Galbraith points out, the intellectual estate is far less organized than the business department, and far less confident when asserting its values. But, perhaps, this is the occasion to find a new script, one infused with confidence and optimism. After all, the ivory tower now has a modem.



*Molly, my sister and I fell out,  
And what do you think it was all about?  
She loved coffee, and I loved tea,  
And that was the reason we couldn't agree.*

I NEED NOW TO MENTION another order of differences that are particular to this discussion. These are the fundamental differences that make each department what it is. They are reflected in nuances and differences in emphasis that in turn lead to wider vistas of preference and choice. It is in some sense played out as a word game—the keywords being *interested* and *disinterested*, *extrinsic* and *intrinsic*, *value* and *values*, *asset* and *trust*—but underlying the words are whole universes of activities and objectives that are as different in kind as proverbial fishes of the sea.

Businesses, of course, are built for interested purposes, chiefly profit making. Those who run them are managers, accountants, lawyers, engineers, technicians, and clerks who work as a team to maximize profits, increase market share, and deliver attractive dividends to stockholders. They are guided in this work by principles of economics, first and last. And, to the degree that the business department thinks about the aesthetic department, Galbraith puts it in plain language. He writes: “Aesthetic achievement is beyond the reach of the planning system and, in substantial measure, in conflict with it.... To assert aesthetic goals is...to interfere with the management of the consumer.”

Despite persistent efforts to make the legions of writers, artists, and scholars (and the institutions that provide them shelter) more business-like, they remain for the most part dedicated to serving disinterested purposes. They remain persons who, by training and instinct, are very much at home with disinterested work. And, by and large, the purposes of these aesthetic workers continue to

be guided by values and imperatives rooted in history and tradition, and hardly ever, if at all, in social or economic theory.

I am a member of the aesthetic department, of course, and I have been a very enthusiastic proponent of things digital, particularly where my own department is concerned. I have worked with computers, studied their insides, and I have made efforts to understand how they can be made to interact with one another and with other technologies to manipulate ideas. I am a believer. And precisely because I am a believer I have a duty to question, not just the foundation of that belief, but also the expectations it raises. Needless to say, our choices have already provided us with more than one reason to believe in the law of unintended consequences. Historian Peter Gay put it nicely, I think, in his *Bridge of Criticism* (invoking the voice of Voltaire):

We welcomed the new only if we found it good. Open-mindedness is not the same thing as empty-headedness.... The tyranny of the old, which was the tyranny of [the eighteenth century], was pernicious, but it was less pernicious than the tyranny of the new, which is the tyranny of the twentieth century.

• • •

*O would I were where I would be!  
There would I be where I am not;  
For where I am I would not be,  
And where I would be I cannot.*

And that is the danger with this digital business. It is not only new and promising, it is also wonderfully complex and decorated with *cutting edge* gadgets. And, the fact is, we do not have a clue about its real implications for ourselves or for society in general. Understanding profit potential or technical possibility is one thing, but comprehending the depth to which this digital business may change how we perceive, think, imagine, behave, live together, etc., remains well ahead of us. But it is *cutting edge*, and there is no place we like to be more than ahead of ourselves. And, of course, when we get so ahead of ourselves that our work becomes motivated by gadgets, and not the necessity of our ideas, it becomes increasingly

unlikely that we will produce much of lasting value. Historian Jacques Barzun was perhaps being too polite when he wrote: “The absolute freedom of the creator, axiomatic for over a century, has produced masterpieces that demonstrate the value of the ever-new. But since original genius is not given to every artist, much spiritless contriving masquerades as innovation.” And, of course, this is not just the disease of artists and writers; it is the disease of the age, as all of us—butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers—have given ourselves to it at one time or another.

We see it everywhere: gadgets that serve no real purpose, useless software, mountains of disorganized information gathered, not out of necessity, but only because it is possible. Then there are the husbands and wives trying to manipulate household budgets with corporate-sized digital spreadsheets, or all those people rushing to buy screen savers when no screen needs saving, or all those cosmetic and clothing salespeople consulting idiotic computer programs to accomplish what ordinary human sensibilities do better. Worse yet, there are all those would-be artists and writers out there putting their faith in hardware and gadgets in hopes of finding that which their innate talent and intelligence denies them. And let us not forget the scientists, especially those who look to computers more to avoid sweat and toil, and, short of that, dream of digital models for everything under the sun, never mind that a good portion will yield little or nothing of value, or that some things just do not lend themselves to modeling.

Computers and their associated technologies can be potent instruments that can advance work in many fields, but only when applied appropriately. We absolutely must not allow ourselves to come to believe they can effectively substitute for human beings when it comes to matters that require the exercise of intelligence, intuition, judgment, talent, or imagination. Computers are in fact rather stupid, though I admit that they are unequalled in their ability to follow very precise instructions and carry out work based on those instructions at high rates of speed. But as much as we might like to associate computers with all work, some work will ever resist; this is the reality of the matter, and we must not forget it.

And beyond our excess of enthusiasm for the machines themselves is our propensity to do something merely because it is possible, especially if we smell a profit in the doing, whether or not we ought to be doing it. We like to forget that there are sometimes good

reasons for not doing something, that there are higher values to be served than the quest for money and goods. Such higher values are those that benefit society as a whole over time. They are the ones that define us as a society, establish continuity from one generation to the next, set the tone for relationships with one another, and provide the foundation for other values that allow us to carry on our lives in useful and meaningful ways. They help us distinguish, say, between a work of art and a Las Vegas lounge act, or tell the difference between useful science and clever quackery, or simply to know humbug when we see it.



*In a cottage in Fife  
Lived a man and his wife,  
Who, believe me, were comical folk;  
For, to people's surprise,  
They both saw with their eyes,  
And their tongues moved whenever they spoke!*

IN THAT REGARD, I want now to turn my discussion more particularly to museums. Museums represent instances where choices are made, usually based on criteria that have at the root something of importance to us as a society. In that regard, at least, a museum is a very sensible thing. It is so entirely sensible that I once took it upon myself to make one. What makes the idea of a museum so sensible is that it allows us—if I may be permitted to lift the words of Italo Calvino out of context—“to move in a space of limitless dimensions of the drawn and drawable, to establish connections between the most contradictory stylistic universes, to make elements belonging to divergent figurative cultures or conventions of perspective coexist within the horizon of the same page.” And, of course, it is from that single coherent page that we—human beings everywhere—discover the foundations of new knowledge and the impulses for the exercise of our imagination.

Every culture—hither, and yon—has devised some way to retain, integrate, and transmit its memories. Each has said, in effect, that there are some things that are outside the ordinary commerce of life, and that their value resides within the things themselves, whether they are sacred things, magical things, signifying things, commemorative things, or historical, scientific, scholarly and artistic things. And, the thinking is, by removing these things from common stock, by making them special, we make them relevant to our highest aspirations, our vision of the future, the stuff that gives pur-

pose to all of life, including the fruits of our commerce and the labor of our days. But when a museum curator expresses his or her reservations about agreements that would allow a business to exploit a museum's holdings for profit, it is a concern that in so doing the value that is intrinsic will be exchanged for a new value, one that is extrinsic and therefore irrelevant. I have been bothered a great deal lately by the spectacle of digital entrepreneurs who, for example, seem more interested in the purchase of fame than in the purchase of works of art that have become famous for the greatness they contain. This may seem a little too precious for some, but it is the crux of our worry. For the aesthetic department, the proper placement of value is everything.

There is also a concern that the integrity of the thing may be compromised, and though the person who created it may be absent, a responsibility to guard the intent of the creator remains. It may not be a legal responsibility, but it is at least an ethical one. For every ethical lapse a cynic is born, and cynicism breeds carelessness everywhere. On the digital frontier it will merely be easier to rationalize our lapses, given the sheer weight of numbers.

Realistically, the ability of the aesthetic department—which includes artists, writers, and scholars of every stripe—to enforce agreements concerning the exploitation of their works and to protect the integrity of the materials in their care from abuse will ever be in proportion to the size of our pocketbook. And we know that the aesthetic department's pocketbook is no match for a government treasury or the coffers of large corporations. What strength we have rests entirely within the values we serve, in our civility, in our intellectual integrity, and in our sense of duty to historical and intellectual imperatives.

As I said, this may be the moment for the aesthetic department to find its confidence, the moment to assert its values more broadly upon the social landscape. After all, the grand technology that is the cause of our present discussion is useless without content. The aesthetic department is the natural source of the best content. While the aesthetic department needs the cooperation and material support of the business department to develop the digital infrastructure and expertise for its participation, so does the business department need us. They need, not just our images, but also our example—our disinterested example where emphasis is ever on quality over quantity. If the public is to be interested in buying their machines and

supporting the growth of that grand vision of an “information superhighway,” they are going to want more from it than infotainment, stock quotations, weather reports, and mind-numbing arcade-style games. People are going to want—and desperately need—things that remind them of their humanity as well as things that provide assurance that life is more than the pushing of stones up frightful hills in endless repetitions, and never a stone to love.

The opportunities at hand promise much, and all parties have much to gain from the exploitation of these new technologies. What I fear, though, is that old habits will prevail, that all concerned will not take the trouble to see that real revolutions are revolutions of ideas. Surely we can see that, absent ideas, all of this will come to nothing; we will have made a glittering world of gadgets without plan or purpose—a vacuum celebrating a vacancy.

*There are men in the village of Erith  
Whom nobody seeth or beareth,  
And there looms on the river there  
A barge that nobody roweth or steereth.*