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**How Do You Build A Discipline From The Ground Up?
Robert H. Ellison, Marshall University**

**Delivered at the 21st Annual West Virginia Undergraduate Literary Symposium
Marshall University
March 2, 2013**

Thank you, Dr. Hill. First, let me thank everyone for coming out today and commend you for your efforts. I'm guessing you weren't required to be here as some kind of class assignment, which means you put in some extra work to write a paper and extra expense to come and deliver it for us. Conferences are often seen as something that just professors do, but they can be good experiences for undergraduates as well. If you're going to graduate school, that's especially the case, because you're getting a head start on what professional development in literary studies is all about. Even if you're not, participating in events like this can be a kind of "icing on the cake" of your college years.

Today, I'd like to talk about a topic that's one of my research specialties. My title is "How do you build a discipline from the ground up?," and I want to organize it around two phrases that you may or may not be familiar with. The first is this: "if I have seen further than other men, it's because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." It's often attributed to Isaac Newton, who used it in a letter he wrote to his fellow scientist Robert Hooke dated February 5, 1676. I haven't been able to find the complete letter, but here's the immediate context:

What Des-Cartes did was a good step. You have added much several ways, & especially in taking ye colours of thin plates into philosophical consideration. If I have seen further it is by *standing on ye shoulders of Giants*. ("On the Shoulders of Giants")

The phrase apparently goes back, however, at least to the 12th century and has appeared, in some form, in the works of writers ranging from Robert Burton to George Herbert to S.T. Coleridge (Bartlett). If you really want to impress your friends sometime, you can use the Latin version, *Nos essi quasi nanos gigantum humeris insidentes*, or “We are as dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants” (“On the Shoulders of Giants”).

Whatever its origin, the meaning of the phrase is pretty clear: even someone like Newton, whom most of us would acknowledge as a “giant” in his own right, owed some of his insights and accomplishments to people who had preceded him.

My second phrase is “to boldly go where no one has gone before.” Here’s the context, taken from my favorite series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*:

Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before. (“Star Trek”)

So, what do these phrases mean for a bunch of English majors and professors? More specifically, what do they have to do with the topic of my talk today?

Let me suggest that the first phrase applies to most of us here. You could write the paper you gave today, and faculty members can write the books and articles they publish, because someone paved the way. They prepared scholarly editions and edited anthologies so we can have the very best primary texts to work with. It takes a lot of work to pull something like that off: the Preface and Acknowledgements sections of the Victorian volume of the latest *Norton Anthology of English Literature* list the names of well over 100 scholars who completed questionnaires and did other things to help make it what it is (xxiii-xxvi).

These and other scholars have also put in the “blood, sweat, and tears” it takes to write secondary sources, the books and articles that you listed in the Works Cited of your papers. I don’t want to sound immodest, but I’ve published articles, written a book, worked with 4 colleagues on a collection of essays, and edited another collection on my own, so I know something of what goes into academic research and writing. If it weren’t for the people who did that kind of work, you would not have been able to do the research that went into your papers. Perhaps some of you will go on from here to “pay it forward,” to write books and articles yourselves and someday be the giant on whose shoulders future generations stand to see even further than you have.

But what if that legwork has not been done, or if only small steps have been achieved? That’s the position in which I find myself. Before I go into the details, let me provide a bit of context. As I’m sure you know, English, history, and other disciplines have any number of subfields within them, many of which have the word “Studies” in their name. “British” and “American” studies are among the more common terms; students here at Marshall can earn a degree in religious studies, and pursue minors in African and African American, Asian, Latin American, sexuality, and women’s studies (“Interdisciplinary Minors”). A program in film studies is in the works as well.

I’m working in a lesser known and less well established subfield, “Sermon Studies.” Now, I suspect one of two things just happened. When you heard the word “sermon,” either your ears perked up or your eyes glazed over. Let me speak to the second group for a moment. You might be saying to yourself, “hang on a minute, doc. You English profs talk a good game about ‘audience awareness,’ but I think you’ve missed the boat here. Have you forgotten who you’re

talking to? We're undergrads, mostly from public universities, not preachers or seminary students. What does the sermon have to do with us?"

You wouldn't be the only ones asking that question! When I blogged about sermon studies last November, someone posted a comment that read,

Forgive me if this seems blunt, but isn't "sermon studies" just another name for homiletics? And haven't we been studying homiletics as part of many fields for a long time now?

And what, pray tell, makes "sermon studies" deserving of its own field status rather than simply being one component of already established fields like pastoral or historical theology? (Campbell)

I want to say to you now what I said to him then: I do think there is a difference, and a rather significant one. Homiletics is a field for preachers, those who are studying to become preachers, and the professors under whom they study. In fact, membership in a professional organization called the Academy of Homiletics is open only to "teachers and doctoral graduate students of homiletics" ("About the Academy of Homiletics").

Sermon studies, on the other hand, is very much a multidisciplinary field. Of the nearly 50 essays in the two collections I've worked on, only one was written by a preacher, with a few others by scholars in theology and religious studies. The other fields with the highest representation are history and English, followed by rhetoric, communication studies, and even education ("List of Contributors," *A New History* xi-xiv; "List of Contributors," *The Oxford Handbook* xi-xii).

Of all of those disciplines, I can of course speak to English most directly. Ours is very much a "big tent" kind of field. We study not only short stories, novels, poems, and plays, but

also film, graphic novels, and a host of other genres. In a Victorian nonfiction class I'll teach this summer, we'll read the standard essays by Arnold, Carlyle, Darwin, Eliot, Huxley, Mill, and others, but also "nonliterary" texts such as interviews with children about working conditions in the mines and factories in Yorkshire and London. There's even a letter to the editor of the *London Times* in which a prostitute argues that she and others like her should be treated as victims, not as criminals because they did what they did out of economic necessity rather than by choice ("The Great Social Evil" 1620-1624). If there is room for texts like these under our "big tent"—and I'm very glad indeed that there is—then there should also be room for sermons, which, after all, can be studied in terms of their historical context, tone, theme, literary devices, and so on—the same things we consider when we study the works that are more traditionally defined as "literature."

I hope this has moved some of you from the "eyes glazed over" group to the "ears perked up" group. Let me now address those folks for a moment. Scholars have been writing about preaching for a long time, but "sermon studies" as a distinct subfield is still somewhat in its infancy. To return to the two phrases I used at the beginning of my talk, there are few giants upon whose shoulders we can stand, so we need to "boldly go where no one has gone before."

The obvious question, then, is "what might that look like?" If a scholarly discipline is to thrive, several things need to be in place. Let me give you some examples of resources scholars in other fields may take for granted, but we don't have in sermon studies. I tell my comp students that their thesis statements don't always have to have three points, but if it happens to work out that way, that's ok too. So here are the three things I have in mind.

The first is a clear sense of the canon. Researchers at other schools, and even one of our own graduate students here at Marshall, have asked me where they can find sermons on such-

and-such a text. I had to give the answer every teacher dreads: "I don't know." And it's not just that *I* don't know; given the current state of databases around the world, this is something that *can't be known*. If you search for sermons in WorldCat or another catalog, it will turn up lots of volumes, but it won't tell you even the titles of the sermons within those volumes, to say nothing of the texts they're based on, their subject matter, the occasions on which they were preached, and so on. So we have to find what we need the hard way: asking others for suggestions, stumbling over relevant texts through sheer dumb luck, or wading through haystacks of books hoping to find that one elusive needle. Imagine going into the library on your campus and walking up and down the stacks, opening every book to see whether it has what you're looking for. That's essentially what sermon scholars have to do, and it's obviously not a very efficient process.

Next, scholars need places where they can interact and network with those who share their interests. I stopped going to literature conferences years ago because I was almost always put in the last session, the panel that had papers the organizers wanted to accept so they'd have a good turnout, but didn't know what to do with. I've fit in better at multidisciplinary meetings such as the Western Conference on British Studies, the International Society for the History of Rhetoric, and the American Society of Church History. If I wanted to attend a conference that focused specifically on the sermon, though, I'd be out of luck once again.

Finally, there needs to be a place where scholars can publish their work. Just as there are conferences that might have one paper out of many on the sermon, there are journals that will occasionally publish articles on preaching. I've published in *Anglican and Episcopal History* and *Victorian Literature and Culture*, and I've seen articles in *American Quarterly*, *Philosophy and*

Rhetoric, and others. There are journals for just about every literary specialty I can think of, but there is no publication that focuses only on the sermon.

Those are some of the challenges my colleagues and I face as we're trying to build sermon studies "from the ground up." What about you? If you're looking for additional challenges during your undergraduate days, or if you have plans to go on to graduate school, what can you do to either "stand on the shoulders of giants" or "boldly go where no one has gone before"?

I don't want to sound too much like a salesman, but if I were an entrepreneur speaking to a crowd in a hotel ballroom, I'd say I want to give you an opportunity to get in on the "ground floor" of an exciting new business venture. If the idea of sermon studies has piqued your interest, let's chat before we go our separate ways. As is the case with any "startup venture," there's plenty of work to be done, and my research network and I can use all the help we can get!

If sermon studies doesn't float your boat—and, since it's such a niche field, I wouldn't be surprised or disappointed if it doesn't—there are plenty of other ways to make your mark in the academic world. Back in 1987, a Swedish church historian named Rune Imberg published a book on the Oxford Movement, an aspect of Victorian religion that's one of my special research interests. A great deal had already been published on the Movement, especially on John Henry Newman, one of its leading figures, and Imberg wondered whether the well might have run dry. Early in the book, he asked "What, then, is the point of doing any further studies...? Do we not know everything, or almost everything, that is worth knowing about it and about its leaders?" (13). He went on to answer his own question—and to provide helpful guidance to scholars in general—on the next page. He wrote that more work could and should be done, provided that it

did not just take us down the same paths. Rather, scholars would need to “use new sources, work with old sources in a new way, or ask new questions” (14).

Most of your work so far has probably been with the second and third parts of that phrase, working “with old sources in a new way” and finding ways to “ask new questions.” You’ve probably taken—or are going to take, before you graduate—a course in critical theory; at the very least, I suspect you’ve discussed critical approaches to literature in a number of your classes. You’re already aware, therefore, of the variety of “lenses” through which we can look at literary works. The textbook a colleague is using in his theory class this spring has chapters on a dozen of them, ranging from structuralism and new historicism to ecocriticism and narratology (Barry). Some of these categories will fall out of favor and be replaced by new ones; as is the case with fashion, some of them may eventually come back around!

This dynamic nature of our work means that there will always be more than “one way to skin a cat.” Keep trying on those different lenses until you find the ones that help you see a text most clearly. If you’re really feeling cutting-edge, you might even grind your own lenses, as it were, and come up with theoretical perspectives of your own!

Advances in technology can also help us ask new questions of old texts. The phrase “digital humanities” didn’t even exist when I was in graduate school, but now it’s a very robust field, a nice blend of what some would call right-brain and left-brain thinking. To use a very simple example, we now have online concordances where you can look up every instance of every word in the works of writers such as Blake, Dickens, Hopkins, Ibsen, Keats, Miller, Shakespeare, Shaw, Shelley, and Wilde (Matsuoka; Potter and Struss; “The Web Concordances”). These, and later generations of even more powerful tools, allow us to examine texts, and to find connections among texts, in ways we had not been able to do before.

Sermon studies emphasizes the first part of Imberg's phrase—using “new sources”—and you can do that in your areas of interest as well. Richard Altick taught English not far from here, at Ohio State, from 1945 to 1982. He was one of that rare breed of scholars who could write books that were both academically sound and a genuine pleasure to read. One of those books, *The Art of Literary Research*, was the first book I had to read in graduate school, and there are some passages that will probably stay with me forever. The first is: “‘The test of a vocation,’ the aphorist-essayist Logan Pearsall Smith once wrote, ‘is the love of the drudgery it involves’” (15). I can still remember spending hours feeding dimes (and, yes, they had to be dimes) into the microfilm printer in the basement of the University of North Texas library. Technology has made the work somewhat more efficient these days, but research, as you well know, can still be a mind-numbing task. I'd rather be doing that, though, than just about anything else, and I suspect that most of you know what I mean.

The second statement is more to the point of what I'm talking about here. He wrote that “No scholar ever has to peer around for something to do” (141). Scholars are, pretty much by definition, known for their intellectual curiosity; they're always thinking about something and always have some kind of project in mind, often several at the same time. You've demonstrated that quality by coming here. Let me encourage you to keep it up. As I mentioned earlier, the “tent” of English studies is quite large, and it's getting bigger all the time. Now let's be realistic: the chances of a lost Dickens novel or Shakespeare play turning up in a desk drawer are about as good as the odds of finding a Picasso in a yard sale. It could happen, I suppose, but it's not very likely. Other new authors, texts, and genres, however, are coming on to our radar all the time. Keep up with these developments, and research topics will all but fall into your lap.

And don't try to do the work alone. The first step is finding one or two people whose opinions you trust and asking them to comment on what you write (and doing the same for them in return). I try not to send something out without having a colleague look it over, and I recommend that you get in that habit too, if you're not already. Peer review isn't just something you do in freshman composition; it's an academic's way of life!

But I'm also talking about something more than that. Don't just find people who will look over something you wrote on your own; also find people with whom you can join forces and work on things together. I don't have the "skill set" to be a scientist, and even if I did, I think I'd prefer the ability to work wherever I wanted rather than having to be in a lab all the time. One thing I do envy about them, though, is the collaborative nature of their work. We tend to work alone in libraries, dorm rooms, and offices, but scientists pretty much have to work as a team.

So let's take a page from their playbook. One of the great experiences I've had here at Marshall is the opportunity to do just that. I've had the chance to be part of faculty committees who have helped give direction to our first year seminar, redesigned the core courses in the English major, and built a whole new sophomore-level course in the honors college.

That can translate into the research arena as well. I've been fortunate to develop a strong network of colleagues throughout North America and the UK, and I'm working with a librarian right here at Marshall to build a database that will enable scholars to search for sermons by scripture text and the other categories I mentioned a few minutes ago. You may remember the phrase "if you build it, they will come," from the movie *Field of Dreams*; we're hoping that this project will draw new people in and help those already in sermon studies to do even more and better work.

I encourage you to work along those lines too. Find other students on your campus who share your interests, and do something bigger than either one of you could manage on your own. And seek out a faculty member who can mentor you along the way. Some schools even have money available to help support faculty-student research. If yours is one of them, find a way to get in on the action!

But also expand your network beyond those people you can see face-to-face. I'm betting you have Facebook friends who live in far-flung places; why not do the same with your academic circles? One of my closest collaborators is a man named Bob Tennant, who lives in a rural part of Scotland. He and I met at a conference in Dallas in 2006, and we've seen each other a time or two since then. I have such a bad memory for faces, though, that I might not recognize him if we passed each other on the street.

Because I'm in West Virginia and he's in the UK, most of our work is done by email. That's even more the case with some of my other colleagues. I have no idea what most of the contributors to my collections look like, or even what they sound like on the phone, because email accounts for 100% of the communication between us. Many people have talked about how impersonal such "interactions" can be, and they have a point, but these collaborations have been productive nonetheless—and, given where all of us live and what our schedules are, they simply could not have happened any other way.

All of this boils down to another phrase I will remember for a long time, both because of who first wrote it and because of the circumstances in which it was passed along to me. When I finished my PhD, my mentor, Dr. Bob Stevens at The University of North Texas, gave me a wonderful book entitled *The Genius Of Writers*. On the inside cover, he wrote these words: "God uses us to help each other so, lending our minds out."

That's from "Fra Lippo Lippi," a poem by Robert Browning. The title refers to Filippo Lippi, an Italian painter who was born around 1406 and died in 1469. He entered a monastery when he was only sixteen, but as he got older, he apparently decided that he'd rather be an artist than a monk ("Fra Lippo Lippi Biography"). That tension or conflict between the church and the world is evident in Browning's poem, as Lippi tries to reconcile the vows he took as a boy with his inability or unwillingness to practice celibacy as an adult.

The poem is also a meditation on the nature of art itself. Lippi's religious patrons want him to "forget there's such a thing as flesh" and somehow focus just on painting "the souls of men." Lippi himself, however, insists that it's a matter of both/and rather than either/or. He asks

Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,
 Left foot and right foot, go a double step,
 Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,
 Both in their order? ...

Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
 And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?
 Or say there's beauty with no soul at all —
 (I never saw it — put the case the same —)
 If you get simple beauty and naught else,
 You get about the best thing God invents:
 That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed. (Browning)

Later, about 3/4 of the way through the poem, we find the line Dr. Stevens quoted. Here's the context:

don't you mark? we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted — better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out. (Browning)

If you're a religious person, you might embrace that sentiment in full. If you're not, you might be more comfortable amending it a bit to read "*we* help each other so." Either way, the idea of "lending our minds out" is the main thing, and the thought I want to leave you with. Hillary Clinton introduced many of us to the African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child," and I want to suggest that it will also take a village, whether local or global, "virtual" or "real," to propel the humanities forward for the remainder of the 21st century. If one person standing on the shoulders of one giant can see a long way, how much more can be taken in by many people standing on the shoulders of many giants? Who knows? Perhaps one day, one of you will see far enough to "boldly go where no one has gone before" and play a part in building an academic discipline "from the ground up." Thank you very much.

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