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*Timing a First Entry onto the
Academic Job Market: Guidelines
for Graduate Students Soon
to Complete the PhD*

DAVID CHIONI MOORE

It will be no news to anyone in literary studies that for many years the job market has been rough. An increase in part-time academic labor, state budgetary cuts, an overproduction of PhDs, and more have all resulted in a situation in which most candidates, it seems, don't get the job they want their first time out. One sign of the pervasiveness of this crisis is that I don't need to explain, to my literary studies audience, at least, what I mean by "first time out." Indeed, that phrase would puzzle those in schools of medicine or law or business: for there, on a fixed schedule with your entering class, you finish the degree, you get a job, and go. For humanities PhDs, however, more fuzziness obtains. The point of eventual completion of a PhD is far from fixed, and one's success in the hiring market is similarly uncertain. It has consequently become accepted that budding PhDs may have to go to the market two times or more to land the job they want.

One question, therefore, that faces nearly every dissertation writer—and there are over six thousand graduate students in the MLA—is when to go out first. For if you'll only really get a job the second time, shouldn't your first run be "premature"? Because the job market process, early entry or not, is so important and taxing for candidates and such an occupation for hiring committees, the timing question merits careful thought. In the following few pages I offer a set of guidelines for dissertation writers—my primary addressees—and their advisers.

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In one sense, of course, the timing of first market entry is a personal decision, so I begin by noting the idiosyncratic factors I can't discuss. Some people, for example, enjoy their graduate student lives a lot and so aren't rushing to depart, while for others, graduate school is better left behind. Sometimes spouse or partner factors cause a candidate to want to leave, while in other cases those dynamics prompt a candidate to stay. Economic obligations, an intellectual sense of readiness or incompleteness, parallel nondissertation projects, and so forth can all complicate the choice of when to go. Since these factors are personal, I focus on the professional aspects of "When should I go out?"

The window during which one asks this question is the dissertation-writing phase. Those who haven't started writing should certainly *not* go, and those who have already defended will certainly be out. But once the dissertation is begun—a few chapters drafted by September, say—it becomes legitimate to question whether this should be the year. Of course, more than anything else your entry on the market depends on the expectation of *completion* of the dissertation before arrival on the hiring campus. But actual dates of dissertation completion are difficult to forecast, even for projects under way. We all know of candidates under heavy pressure who have completed half-done theses in eight months. And we all also know of candidates who spend four years writing similar amounts. Combined with the fact that there is no necessary relation between the quality of a dissertation and the length of time it takes to write it, there can be no iron rule that says, for example, that three completed chapters by September invariably means a "go." These preliminaries done, let us imagine that it is August or September of a given year and that your dissertation is under way and plausibly completable by the next July. To go or not to go: that is the question.

THE CASE FOR GOING OUT RIGHT NOW

The first reason you might wish to go out "early"—perhaps only on a test basis, after, say, only the top ten positions in your field—is that such a foray gives you the opportunity to learn firsthand the workings of the academic market when the stakes may not be so great. As anyone who has recently applied for academic jobs can attest, there is much procedure in the market. One scans the lengthy lists for certain fields, regions, types of institution, and levels of position. Then one (or several) template letters get customized for each attractive job. A c.v. is prepared just so, writing samples are selected and refined, a divergent set of requests and deadlines are juggled, clocks and calendars and phones and mail are watched and hopes are checked. The sheer bureaucracy of a job search is substantial—it can be nearly full-time work for the three months of autumn—and though graduate-studies directors can

outline the general procedures, there is no substitute for going through the process. Candidates invariably report much greater organization, efficiency, flexibility, and indeed success the second time around.

The second reason for a candidate to go out “early” is to see what hiring departments want. In ways, this reconnoitering means learning how fields and subfields are described. Someone working on Toni Morrison and V. S. Naipaul, for example, whatever his or her own perception of the project, might be classified by the market as “multicultural,” “ethnic,” “postcolonial,” or perhaps even Caribbean or Atlantic. For those in newer fields, the dynamics of market categories vary. Sometimes the growth of innovative scholarship, often conducted by graduate students, precedes and influences later market categories (queer theory and the literature of the Americas come to mind). At other times it is the widespread adoption of a hiring category that comes first and even *generates* the graduate work that’s being done; here I speak, for example, of scholars who thought of themselves as focused Africanists, Caribbeanists, or South Asianists, only to realize that the market sought (and thus produced) a geographically bigger thing called postcolonial.

A concerted effort at the market also makes clear the difference between the primary hiring categories—nineteenth-century fiction, say—and those other areas of graduate student work that the market commonly classifies as merely “desirable supports” or emphases within the major fields. Examples of such generally nonautonomous hiring categories include feminism, cultural studies, and literary theory. Of course, a candidate can always simply read the job lists carefully in the fourth year or before and compare the advertisements with one’s own strengths and interests—indeed this is a good idea—but, again, actually having to select positions, compose letters, and present oneself as a candidate based in part on the external market’s terms is a self- and institutional-learning experience difficult to simulate.

A third reason to go out to the market perhaps before you sense yourself completely ready is, for those who get further in the process, to get a feel for conference and even campus interviewing. The experience of being jammed inside two bewilderingly large hotels, wearing clothes you rarely wear, in the company of ten thousand literature professors for four days straight can be unsettling—to say nothing of being asked tough questions by five people whom you’ve never met and who hold all the cards. Of course, and again, it is not strictly necessary to go out to the market to get parts of this experience: an independent visit to the MLA convention, a mock home-campus interview, and other techniques can help.

The fourth and perhaps strongest reason for a first run on the market is that your failures and successes, if carefully analyzed *ex post*, can teach you a great deal about yourself, at least in several candidate and professional di-

mensions. If I may be excused for using myself as an example, my first (and unsuccessful) foray taught me several things. One lesson came courtesy of the fact that the dozen letters I sent to research institutions met with strong response, while the ten letters sent to teaching-focused schools were met with silence. What I realized was that my teaching letter was merely a weak reformat of the one I sent to research schools. I had swapped the order of some paragraphs and modified some phrases, but essentially I was configured as a research-focused person and it showed. Another lesson came courtesy of the response to my writing samples. I sent out one of three basic essays, depending on the position, and though I considered them equally strong they met with differentiated fates: again, the market was “speaking” in a way self-analysis can’t produce.

My next lesson came courtesy of the conference interviews. Like many other literary scholars, I had spent a good amount of time after my BA pursuing something far different from literary studies. Indeed, colleagues of mine from around the country have been chemists, dancers, preachers, and advertising agents before their return to academe. I had worked five years in corporate finance and had even published a few papers in accounting theory—an interesting if incongruous biographical feature that caused puzzlement and some distraction for interview committees. In my next job market run I was able to contextualize more effectively and briefly this aspect of my background. Of course, everybody’s identity creates a different set of presentation issues, for which no general rules can be described, but the important thing to note is that it is difficult to know the responses of the market to one’s particularities in advance.

Yet another lesson that I learned courtesy of interview committees was that I had not—and I was not alone here—thought enough about the teaching life. Quite commonly, budding PhDs construct their professional identities around the dissertation. Given that most newly minted PhDs are generated by that small fraction of North American institutions with the largest emphasis on research, and given that the teaching—though substantial—that most graduate students do is too often confined to first-year foreign language and to freshman comp, this comes as no surprise. Hence the common assessment of many hiring committees that candidates are insufficiently broad as teachers. One sign of the dissertation-centered self comes when interview committees ask candidates to tell about their dream course: too often the answer recapitulates the dissertation’s highly focused bibliography. An initial run onto the academic market, even if unsuccessful, can therefore reemphasize the centrality of teaching. The time before a second run then gives candidates the opportunity to draft a dozen sample syllabi for various fields and levels, including surveys of the broadest kind, and to come

formally, by means of writing, to a better understanding of their philosophy of teaching. My final lesson from my first run on the market—again courtesy of some lively conference interviews—was that I had done insufficient next-step thinking, for example, in answer to the classic question “What do you plan to do after you revise your dissertation?” This, again, was not merely a matter of “marketing” or of having a pat “right” answer; the question was an important one to which I had given insufficient thought.

The lessons I learned from my initial market run—about job letters, writing samples, the handling of my background, my teaching life, and my long-range future—are rather classic. I point them out, however, not because they constitute “the things every candidate should know” but rather to observe that it is difficult to learn such lessons fully without going to the market and learning them from outside feedback. Other first-time candidates learn different but equally valuable lessons—lessons that even strong market preparation at one’s training institution cannot necessarily teach. To conclude: a first job market trip can be a valuable self-knowledge tool, though only if you do the hard work of self-analysis after an unsuccessful run.

The fifth, the final, the very best, and in many ways the only reason for a first run on the academic market should be that you are ready and *might succeed* and secure a wanted job. This is, of course, the whole point: to launch your rewarding academic life. So go now, because you’re good. Go now, because you’re ready. Go now, because individual jobs are evanescent: though certain general hiring categories and types of institutions appear as regularly as rain, the specifics of each year’s list—which may include a job and a school that fit you right—are not the same from year to year. So seize the moment and go for what you want. With that exhortation I’ll end the argument for going out “this year.”

THE CASE FOR HOLDING OFF ANOTHER YEAR

There also is a multipart case against an early trip to the literary studies market. The first reason to wait is that the market eats enormous chunks of *time*. You must read the tiny typefaces of eight hundred or more job postings (or gaze at them in cyberlists), think about them all, prepare and proofread letters—wondering nervously if you forgot to change the name of school Y’s chair when you reworked the letter for department Z—hone and send out writing samples, and make more trips than you wish to the post office. These activities make up only the initial phase and don’t count the substantial costs of time surrounding conference interviews or campus visits. All these activities, especially when ultimately unsuccessful, consume hours you might otherwise devote to projects such as teaching, reading, publications, nonacademic life, or finishing your

dissertation. Even a limited run takes time. Given the economies of scale involved in pursuing academic jobs (sending out a thirty-fifth letter doesn't take much incremental time), it is likely that pursuit of "only" ten positions will be almost as time-consuming as pursuit of forty-four. The academic market is a major task—though, in fairness and as noted just above, a first year's time expenditure is partially recouped in greater efficiency the next.

The second reason not to pursue an initial academic search in a given year, especially if your prematureness means small likelihood of success, is the *cash* expense. This includes postage for letters and subsequently for writing samples, the often substantial cost of photocopying essays, follow-up daytime long-distance phone calls, dossier-mailing costs if your university's service imposes charges, additional expenses for the nervous such as return-receipt mailings (or simple prestamped postcards), and more. For those with conference interviews, attendance at the MLA means further expense—very commonly in the mid to high three figures—if you do not otherwise intend to go, and even if your home department helps defray the costs. You may also wish to upgrade your interviewing wardrobe, though if you do you'll obviously have the clothes for future years' forays.

A third argument against an early run is the cost, not in time or money but in *emotion*, since pursuit of academic jobs can tax the soul. You get your hopes up, fantasize about that special job, put too much energy into formatting your c.v., wait nervously for phone calls, second-guess your letters and interview responses, and, finally, get plenty of rejections. I would estimate that even the most successful candidates finishing their PhDs hear no on ninety percent of their applications. Indeed, it is likely that at no other time in your decades on the planet will you be so comprehensively and negatively judged. The way the academic process goes, schools typically get four chances to reject you (after initial letters, writing samples, conference interviews, and campus visits), and only one chance for final positive response. October is anxious, November is busy, and December is a month of limbo—to say nothing of, perhaps, January, February, or even early March for campus visits and hiring decisions. This can mean half a year. As the process continues for candidates who pass the first few rounds, the emotional stakes are raised; compare, for example, the emotions of an athlete who is bounced on the first day of a tournament with those of a competitor who loses in the finals. And so, in sum, prospective entrants onto academic markets need to be aware of the emotional energy the job market can consume. Awareness of this fact can lessen the expense, but can't eliminate it.

A fourth reason for avoiding an initial market foray is that your candidacy, though supported by a dissertation under way, might authentically be too early. It may be that your breadth of teaching, degree of scholarly

accomplishment, maturity of perspective, and progress on the dissertation will be insufficient for any hiring committee to make an offer. In certain cases your prematureness may be evident in the initial application letter and c.v., or perhaps in the submission of an inadequately marinated or too isolated thesis chapter. The later your unreadiness becomes apparent, however—such as at an MLA interview or even after—the greater the waste of time and energy for everyone concerned and the poorer a reflection your candidacy is on your training institution and advisers. Thus an “insincere” or merely experimental early job search is a terrible idea, not only because of the cost to you but also because of the unfairness to your actually ready fellow applicants and to the hiring committees involved.

The final reason to defer another year is in some sense unreadiness’s worst-case event: the risk, that is, that you might succeed and get the job—when your dissertation will be quite unfinished by the following fall. If you start a job and have not defended, things can be problematic: your initial salary and rank may be lower, and, as history has often shown, it is difficult to complete a dissertation in the first year of a responsibility-filled full-time job. Certainly, many people with uncompleted dissertations have successfully begun full-time jobs, but market aspirants should be aware that the risks can be substantial.

“Should I go out to the market now?” is, finally, a question that only the candidate can assess. The answer depends on your probability of success, emotional stakes, specific field, degree of allied preparation and accomplishment, and numerous other factors. For me and for many others whom I know, a carefully analyzed unsuccessful first run yielded great improvements in the second; there are also those for whom a seemingly early effort achieved success. And yet this is not universally true. What is more, it must be recognized that this whole discussion has been predicated on the deplorable circumstance that several years of trying may be necessary for even extraordinarily qualified newly minted PhDs to get a solid job, and that our profession has therefore normalized the unsettling phrase “the first time out.” This discussion has also been offered in the absence of any general critique of what I have reflexively termed “the market,” though I could imagine many starting points for that critique. Nonetheless, I present these guidelines in the hope that they may prove useful to candidates and their advisers who will be asking charged and freighted job-market-entry questions in the future.

NOTE

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