

The Author as Customer

Vanity Publishing and the Structural Inversion of the Press

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Abstract

This essay argues that vanity publishing is not best understood as a quality problem but as an economic inversion. In conventional publishing, revenue flows from readers to publishers, which aligns the publisher's financial interest with the public circulation of work. In vanity publishing, the author replaces the reader as the primary revenue source, decoupling editorial selection from audience demand and transferring risk from the institution to the creator. The essay develops a structural account of this inversion, distinguishes it from legitimate self-publishing and service provision, and situates it within a broader platform pattern in which participation itself becomes the billable surface. It further argues that generative AI platforms represent the most complete form of this inversion, in which the user pays for access while simultaneously performing the labor of system improvement that the platform would otherwise have to purchase.

1. Introduction

Vanity publishing is usually criticized as a marginal embarrassment within the literary economy: a domain of weak editorial standards, inflated promises, and authors misled by the symbolic appeal of seeing their names in print. This criticism is not wrong, but it is incomplete. It treats vanity publishing as a degraded version of publishing rather than as a distinct economic structure. The central issue is not merely that some books are poorly produced or that some publishers exaggerate what they can deliver. The deeper issue is that the economic relation between publisher, author, and reader has been reversed.

This essay argues that vanity publishing should be understood as an inversion of the press. In conventional publishing, the publisher assumes risk by selecting, editing, producing, and distributing work in the hope that readers will buy it. In vanity publishing, the author becomes the primary source of revenue. The publisher is compensated before readership is established and often independently of whether readership ever materializes. Publication itself, rather than public circulation, becomes the product.

The significance of this inversion extends beyond publishing. Vanity publishing belongs to a broader class of platform systems that sell access to participation under conditions where success is rare. These systems do not primarily sell outcomes. They sell entry into environments where outcomes might, in principle, occur. The participant pays to try, while the platform captures value from the attempt whether or not the attempt succeeds.

The aim is not to defend traditional publishing as pure or democratic. Traditional publishing has its own exclusions, inequities, and failures. The point is more specific: when an institution claims the symbolic authority of publishing while shifting cost and risk onto creators, it changes the meaning of publication itself. What appears as expanded access may instead become a system for extracting value from the desire to participate in culture.

2. The Wrong Critique

Critiques of vanity publishing are often dismissed as snobbery. The objections most commonly voiced concern quality: the books are poorly edited, the prose is undistinguished, the covers are derivative, and the authors lack institutional endorsement. These observations may be accurate, but they identify symptoms rather than mechanisms. A publisher can produce a handsome, well-written

book and still operate according to an exploitative economic structure. Conversely, a publisher can produce work of modest literary merit while performing a genuine service for authors and readers alike. Quality is not the correct diagnostic.

The real problem is structural. It concerns who pays, who bears risk, and in whose interest selection decisions are made. When examined through this lens, vanity publishing is revealed not as a degraded or peripheral variant of publishing but as its systematic inversion: a model in which the author has replaced the reader as the primary customer, and the promise of publication has replaced the delivery of an audience as the product on offer.

This essay makes that structural argument. It does not primarily claim that any particular publisher is bad or that any particular book is embarrassing. It claims that a specific economic configuration has emerged within contemporary publishing, and that this configuration systematically extracts value from creators while imitating the outward form of the institutions it resembles. This is not a marginal anomaly. It is a model that scales.

3. The Conventional Publishing Relation

Vanity publishing is best understood not as inferior publishing, but as a different economic structure altogether: one in which the author replaces the reader as the customer, and publication replaces readership as the product. To understand that structure, it is necessary first to describe the thing that has been inverted. In the conventional publishing model, the publisher functions as a combination of investor, curator, and distributor. It receives manuscripts, most of which it declines, and concentrates resources on those it selects. Having selected a work, it invests capital in editing, design, production, and distribution. It then attempts to recover that investment through sales. Revenue flows from readers, through booksellers, to publishers. If the book fails to find an audience, the publisher bears the loss.

This model does not guarantee good judgment, ethical behavior, or equitable treatment of authors. Traditional publishing has its own documented problems: consolidation, gatekeeping, genre conservatism, inequitable contract terms, and structural barriers to entry for writers from underrepresented communities. None of these flaws are being denied here. The point is not that the traditional model is ideal; it is that the traditional model has one structurally important property.

The publisher's revenue depends, at least partially, on reader demand. If no one buys the book, the publisher has a problem. This creates a weak but real alignment between institutional incentive and public value.

Selection under this model is an economic necessity. Because the publisher is investing its own capital and bearing risk on behalf of the work, it cannot afford to accept everything. Rejection is not a form of cruelty but a structural requirement of the investment logic. The ratio of submissions to acceptances is steep precisely because the commitment of resources is genuine.

4. The Vanity Inversion

In the vanity publishing model, the fundamental economic relationship is reversed. The publisher's revenue is generated not by selling books to readers but by selling publication to authors. Authors pay for packages that may include editorial services, cover design, formatting, distribution listings, and marketing support. The publisher is compensated whether or not the book finds an audience. Risk resides not with the institution but with the creator.

This inversion has consequences that cascade through the entire structure. Because the publisher no longer derives income from reader-facing sales, the editorial selection function weakens or disappears. There is no economic reason to reject manuscripts, because rejection means declining a paying customer. The publisher's incentive is not to find work that audiences will want but to find authors who want to be published. These are different markets with different dynamics.

The worse form of this model does not need successful books. It needs hopeful authors. Each additional manuscript accepted is additional revenue, and the costs of processing another manuscript are low once infrastructure is in place. The business logic points not toward curation but toward volume. A traditional publisher that accepts everything would quickly go bankrupt. A vanity publisher that accepts everything is operating according to its own model's rational imperatives.

The visible result is that vanity publishing produces the outward apparatus of publishing without its economic substance. ISBNs are issued. Covers are designed. Books appear on retail listings. Press-style language accompanies each announcement. But these are outputs of a service workflow, not evidence that anyone in the market has wagered their own capital on the work's public recep-

tion.

5. Risk Transfer and the Logic of Extraction

The concept of risk transfer clarifies what is at stake. In any economic arrangement involving uncertain outcomes, risk must reside somewhere. In the conventional publishing arrangement, the publisher assumes the risk that investment in a title will not be recovered through sales. This risk is not hypothetical; publishers regularly lose money on individual titles, and many publishers fail. The assumption of risk is what justifies the publisher's claim to a significant portion of revenues if the book does succeed.

Vanity publishing does not eliminate this risk. It relocates it. The author pays upfront, sometimes substantially, for services that may or may not result in sales. If the book fails to find readers, the author bears the loss. The platform has already been paid. This arrangement is not inherently illegitimate when it is transparent and when the author understands that they are purchasing services rather than gaining an institutional partner. It becomes problematic when the economic structure is obscured by the symbolic apparatus of traditional publishing.

The deeper issue is that risk is supposed to travel with curatorial authority. A publisher that claims the authority to select, endorse, and legitimize a work is implicitly accepting responsibility for that judgment. When the same authority is claimed while risk is transferred entirely to the author, something has been broken in the relationship between institutional function and institutional accountability. The publisher speaks the language of selective investment while operating the economics of a service vendor.

6. Not Self-Publishing

The distinction between vanity publishing and self-publishing deserves care, because they are often conflated by both critics and apologists. Self-publishing, in its most defensible forms, is transparent about what it is. The author knows they are producing the book themselves, purchasing discrete services from editors, designers, and printers, and distributing through platforms designed for direct-to-market publishing. There is no institutional ambiguity. The author is not under the impression that a press has invested in them or selected them from a field of candidates. They are operating as an independent creative enterprise.

The vanity model becomes structurally distinct, and structurally problematic,

when it adopts the symbolic apparatus of institutional publishing while operating on the author-as-customer logic. The problem is mimicry. Vanity publishers often present themselves using the language of traditional presses: they speak of editorial review, they invoke institutional identity, they describe the relationship with the author in terms that imply selection and endorsement. The author may genuinely believe they have been accepted, validated, or elevated. What they have actually done is purchased access to a production and distribution pipeline.

This ambiguity is not incidental. It is often the product. The author pays not merely for printing and formatting but for the experience of being published, for proximity to the aura that attaches to having cleared institutional gates. If the process were clearly and honestly described as service purchasing, many authors would decline. The pitch depends on the confusion between endorsement and commerce.

7. Participation as Product

There is a conceptual structure underlying vanity publishing that extends well beyond the publishing industry. The author is not simply buying a service; they are buying access to a process in which their own creative aspiration is the raw material. The platform sells the creator back their desire to be published in packaged form. The aspiration to write, to be read, to be recognized as an author: these are the inputs from which the platform extracts value. The output is not primarily a book that circulates among readers but a transaction in which the act of becoming a published author is completed.

This is a structure in which participation itself is what is being sold. The creator is simultaneously producer and customer. They generate the work, supply the energy, bring the aspiration, and then pay for the privilege of having their aspiration formally recognized. Publication ceases to be a bridge between writer and audience and becomes instead a passage through institutional-looking gates whose function is no longer to connect writer and audience, but to complete a transaction. The gates may not lead anywhere in particular. What matters is the crossing.

The mechanism is not new. Institutions have always been capable of selling proximity to prestige rather than prestige itself. What is distinctive about vanity publishing is the degree to which it imitates the symbolic language of an

institution built on audience value while substituting author payment as the actual revenue basis. The symbolic structure of traditional publishing, its vocabulary of selection, investment, and public endorsement, becomes raw material for a different economic operation. This structure, in which participation itself is what is being sold, does not end with publishing. It reaches its most complete form in systems where the act of using the platform simultaneously contributes to its ongoing development.

8. The Collapse of Audience Discipline

In conventional publishing, the reader functions as a form of external discipline. Because the publisher depends on sales, it has at least some incentive to consider whether the work will find an audience. Editorial judgment is shaped, however imperfectly, by anticipated reader response. This does not produce uniform quality; publishers misjudge reader demand constantly. But it maintains a structural connection between the publishing institution and the reading public.

When the author replaces the reader as the primary revenue source, this discipline collapses. The publisher no longer needs to ask whether readers will want the book. The relevant question becomes whether the author wants to publish it, which is given in advance by the fact that they have submitted a manuscript and paid a fee. The audience disappears as a structural constraint on editorial decision-making.

The result is a form of hollow publication. The physical and administrative apparatus of publishing is present in full: the ISBN, the copyright page, the listed distributor, the retail presence. But the deeper machinery of audience development, the reader relationship, the marketing investment tied to anticipated return, the critical and commercial infrastructure that surrounds books publishers have genuinely wagered on, is largely absent. What the author receives is the form of publication with the economic content evacuated.

9. Shared Infrastructure and Private Capture

Once this inversion is in place, the economics of scale take on a different character. A further structural argument concerns the economics of scale within vanity publishing operations. Once a platform has established templates, editorial pipelines, cover design workflows, distribution agreements, and retail rela-

tionships, the marginal cost of processing an additional manuscript is low. The infrastructure is fixed; what varies is the number of authors moving through it.

This creates a structural asymmetry. Each author may be charged as though they are receiving a bespoke publishing arrangement, a unique investment of institutional resources tailored to their work. In practice, they are one of many manuscripts being processed through a shared infrastructure whose cost has been amortized across the entire author pool. The author pays for a custom service and receives a templated one.

There is nothing inherently dishonest about operating infrastructure at scale. All large publishing operations have some standardization. The issue is representation. When a platform presents itself as making individualized investments in each author, while in practice treating each author as one instance in a high-volume workflow, the gap between description and reality is doing important work in the transaction. The author's belief that their manuscript is receiving special institutional attention is part of what they are paying for.

10. Symbolic Enclosure

Publishing has always carried symbolic weight that exceeds its economic function. To be published, in the traditional sense, is to have been selected, to have had one's work judged worthy of institutional investment, to have crossed a threshold that not everyone can cross. This symbolic dimension is not trivial. It attaches to how authors describe themselves, how readers assess credibility, how work circulates in professional and literary communities. Publication confers a kind of legitimacy.

Vanity publishing does not ignore this symbolic dimension. It encloses it and resells access to it. The author pays not merely for printing but for the experience of arriving on the other side of a gate that resembles, in its outward form, the gates of traditional publishing. The ISBN, the distributor listing, the press release language, the cover resembling those of books from established houses: these are the symbolic tokens of having been published, and they are what the platform is actually selling.

This is why vanity publishing can be emotionally powerful even when commercially negligible. The commercial result may be close to zero: few sales, no reviews, no lasting audience. But the symbolic result, the ability to say that one has published a book, may feel complete. The platform has delivered the ex-

perience of recognition without the substance of it. It has sold the sensation of crossing the threshold without opening onto anything beyond.

11. The Democratization Defense

Vanity publishers frequently defend their existence by appealing to access. Traditional publishing is slow, opaque, and exclusionary. It favors established authors, agents, and networks. It reflects the cultural biases of a narrow editorial class. Many excellent works never find traditional publishers. Vanity and hybrid publishing, on this account, provide access to authorship that would otherwise be denied.

This argument deserves genuine engagement, because the critique of traditional publishing it contains is substantially correct. The gatekeeping of conventional publishing is real, and it is not always well-calibrated to literary value. Many important works have been rejected. Many unimportant works have been accepted. Access to traditional publishing is distributed inequitably, along lines of class, connection, and cultural capital, as much as along lines of merit.

But democratization and extraction are not the same thing. A genuinely democratic publishing model would give creators more control over their work, more transparency about economic arrangements, more access to readers, and more equitable distribution of revenues. What the vanity model offers is something different: access to the appearance of institutional endorsement in exchange for payment. The author pays to have their work processed by something that resembles a publisher. This is not democracy; it is the sale of democratic-sounding access to a set of institutional symbols whose value depends on being withheld.

The comparison that clarifies this distinction is to platforms that genuinely serve creator autonomy: direct-to-reader publishing tools, open-access infrastructure, cooperative publishing models, and distribution platforms that charge transparent fees for discrete services without claiming curatorial authority. These models expand access by reducing the cost and complexity of reaching readers. Vanity models expand access to the symbol of institutional endorsement while charging for that symbol rather than the underlying connection.

12. Service Providers and Exploitative Intermediaries

The critique of vanity publishing is not a critique of charging authors money. Editors charge for editing. Designers charge for covers. Printers charge for printing.

Publicists charge for publicity. All of these are legitimate commercial relationships in which creators pay for professional services they need. The existence of author-facing payment is not the problem.

The problem is the misrepresentation of institutional function. A service provider sells a service. It does not claim to be investing in the work, selecting it from a field of candidates, or conferring legitimacy on it. It provides what was contracted and is compensated for that provision. The relationship is clear.

A publisher makes different claims. It implies that it has judged the work worthy, that it stands behind its publication, that its name on the spine means something about the work's quality or significance. When an entity makes these claims while operating on the service-provider model, charging authors for access to a production pipeline without assuming meaningful curatorial risk, it is making representations that its economic structure does not support.

This is not an argument about legality, and it is not reducible to fraud in any simple sense. Many of the claims are ambiguous enough to survive legal scrutiny. The issue is the gap between the symbolic claims and the economic reality, and the degree to which that gap is productive for the platform. Authors pay more when they believe they are receiving institutional endorsement rather than a service package. The ambiguity is not incidental to the business model; it is often central to it. A related form of this ambiguity appears wherever paying for something is mistaken for owning it: the user acquires not the thing itself but a constrained and revocable relation to it, presented as if the two were equivalent.

13. Chokepoints and the Economics of Aspiration

Vanity publishing is one instance of a structural pattern that appears most reliably wherever a platform controls a chokepoint: a position of mediated access between participants and the outcomes they seek. Publishing platforms control access to the symbolic and material apparatus of authorship. Professional networks control access to visibility and opportunity. Application marketplaces control access to distribution. Cloud infrastructure controls access to the tools required to operate within a digital economy. In each case, the platform does not merely participate in the market. It stands in front of it.

This position acquires its full power under conditions of extreme oversupply. The number of aspiring authors vastly exceeds the number of commercially successful books. The number of applications uploaded to digital marketplaces

vastly exceeds the number that will ever be meaningfully downloaded. The number of individuals attempting to build businesses, audiences, or professional identities through platform-mediated channels vastly exceeds the number who will achieve meaningful returns. In such environments, failure is not an anomaly. It is the statistical baseline.

Under these conditions, a particular economic logic becomes available. The platform need not depend on the success of participants. It can instead derive revenue from their participation in the attempt. Authors pay to be published regardless of whether their books are read. Developers invest time and money into applications that may never be installed. Professionals purchase tools, subscriptions, and visibility-enhancing services in pursuit of opportunities that may never materialize. The platform does not need any given participant to succeed. It only needs a continuous influx of participants who are willing to try.

These systems do not sell success. They sell access to the possibility of success under conditions where success is rare.

In each case, aspiration is the input. The desire to create, to be seen, to build something that matters, is what drives participation. The platform captures that desire and converts it into revenue at the point of entry, before outcomes are determined, and independently of how they resolve. Payment is not contingent on result. It is tied to access. The result is a system in which the costs of failure are borne individually while the benefits of scale are captured by the platform. Infrastructure is shared and amortized across a large user base, but pricing remains individualized. Each participant experiences the transaction as their own attempt. The platform experiences it as one instance in a high-volume flow.

Vanity publishing is the cultural expression of this structure. What it reveals is not merely a problem within publishing, but a more general transformation in how value is extracted from creative and aspirational activity. The creator does not fail because the system is broken. The system functions because the creator is willing to try.

14. Failure as Baseline

The preceding analysis suggests a further refinement. These systems do not merely tolerate failure. They presuppose it. The viability of a platform that charges for access rather than for outcomes depends on a distribution in which success is rare and attempts are numerous. If most participants were to achieve

the outcomes they seek, the structure would destabilize: costs would need to track results, and the platform would be forced into the more conventional role of investor and partner.

In practice, the opposite condition holds. Success stories, however rare, function as proof that the system works. They justify continued participation by demonstrating that the outcome, while unlikely, is possible. The vast number of unsuccessful attempts remains largely invisible, or is reframed as part of the necessary process of striving. The platform does not deny the difficulty of success. It incorporates that difficulty into its own narrative of legitimacy: the system is demanding, and demanding systems produce real results. The failure rate is absorbed into the story rather than disclosed as a structural feature of the business model.

This produces a subtle but consequential shift in how risk is framed. Participants are not misled about the existence of risk; they are invited to accept it as the price of access. The platform does not promise success. It promises the opportunity to pursue it. The asymmetry lies not in the presence of risk, but in who bears it and who benefits from its distribution. The platform profits from the attempt whether or not the attempt succeeds. The participant profits only if they succeed, and most do not.

Seen in this light, vanity publishing does not exploit authors by guaranteeing failure or deceiving them about its likelihood. It operates within a field where failure is already the statistical norm and aligns its revenue model with that reality. The author pays not for a guaranteed readership but for the chance to participate in a system where readership is scarce. The asymmetry lies not in the existence of risk, but in how that risk is allocated once the platform has been paid.

A complementary dynamic appears at the other end of the distribution. While most participants fail, the few who achieve meaningful traction often do so within or adjacent to the same systems that mediated their initial participation. When such success emerges, it is frequently absorbed back into the platform through acquisition, integration, or talent capture. Projects developed in open or distributed environments are incorporated into centralized infrastructures, and the individuals responsible for them are brought inside the institutional boundary. The platform does not merely extract value from unsuccessful attempts. It also consolidates value from successful ones. The field of participation functions as a distributed search process, generating a large number of low-

probability attempts from which a small number of viable outcomes emerge — and then capturing those outcomes as well.

The system distributes the cost of trying and centralizes the reward of succeeding.

15. Persistence and Performance

If failure is the baseline condition of participation, a further question arises: why does participation persist? Why do individuals continue to invest time, money, and attention in systems where the probability of meaningful success remains low?

Part of the answer lies in the construction of necessity. Platforms do not present themselves merely as optional tools, but as components of what it means to participate seriously in a domain. To publish is to exist as an author within recognized channels. To maintain a professional presence is to be visible within networked systems. To build a business is to operate through accepted infrastructures. These claims are not entirely false, but they are generalized far beyond the subset of participants for whom they are materially justified. Tools that are indispensable at scale are presented as prerequisites at all scales.

The result is a condition of latent participation. Individuals remain enrolled in systems not because those systems are producing commensurate outcomes, but because disengagement appears to foreclose possibility. Accounts are maintained, subscriptions renewed, profiles updated, and projects sustained in a state of partial activation. The participant does not exit the system upon failing to achieve success. They remain aligned with the possibility of it. The platform does not need to deliver results. It needs to remain legible as a pathway through which results might, in principle, be obtained.

This persistence is reinforced by the introduction of metrics that render participation visible and comparable. Activity is quantified: tokens consumed, interactions performed, content produced, visibility maintained. These measures begin as proxies for productive engagement, but once established, they invite direct optimization. Participants do not merely pursue outcomes; they pursue the signals that stand in for them. The system provides a means of acting and a means of displaying that action, and the latter can come to dominate the former.

Under these conditions, the distinction between work and its representation be-

comes unstable. The engineer who maximizes interaction with a system appears productive. The author who achieves publication appears legitimate. The professional who maintains constant visibility appears engaged. These appearances are not meaningless, but they are only indirectly related to the outcomes they imply. The metric measures participation, and participation becomes the target.

This dynamic aligns closely with the economic structure described in earlier sections. Platforms benefit when participation is both persistent and measurable. Persistent participation ensures a continuous flow of engagement, while measurable participation provides the basis for comparison, evaluation, and, where applicable, pricing. The system does not need to ensure that participants succeed. It needs to ensure that their activity remains legible, optimizable, and ongoing.

In this sense, the system does more than extract value from attempts under conditions of failure. It stabilizes those attempts by embedding them within structures that encourage continuation and reward display. Participants are not only drawn into the system by aspiration; they are held within it by necessity and guided within it by metrics. The result is a self-reinforcing loop in which the pursuit of success is sustained, measured, and converted into value regardless of its outcome.

A further extension of this dynamic can be observed in the integration of agent-based systems into platform infrastructures. These systems promise to move beyond discrete tools toward continuous, action-oriented workflows: coordinating communication, managing tasks, and executing operations across domains. At the level of user experience, this appears as an expansion of capability. Structurally, it is an expansion of the platform boundary. Activities that might previously have occurred across disparate tools and contexts are drawn into a single environment, increasing both dependence on and exposure to the system.

This expansion is often tied to subscription tiers that differentiate between basic access and so-called power usage. The participant is encouraged to see themselves not merely as a user, but as someone operating at a higher level of integration, leveraging the system across all aspects of their work. What remains unchanged is the absence of any corresponding mechanism for evaluating whether the actions being taken are viable. The system facilitates execution, but does not impose constraints derived from physical, logistical, or financial reality. It expands what can be done within the platform without expanding what can be

successfully done in the world. Agent-based systems do not depart from the structural logic described above. They extend it. The surface of interaction expands from discrete inputs to continuous workflows, increasing the volume and persistence of activity that can be measured, optimized, and monetized. The participant experiences this as increased capability. The platform experiences it as increased engagement within a controlled environment. The underlying asymmetry remains intact.

At its limit, this structure does not merely extract value from participation. It reorganizes who performs the work that makes the system itself more capable.

16. Inverted Labor and the Paying Annotator

Generative platforms introduce a further refinement of the participation-extraction structure, one that makes the inversion more complete than any of the preceding examples. In conventional software development, the costs of improving a system flow outward from the institution: engineers are employed, annotators are contracted, testers are paid, and the iterative labor of making a system more capable is compensated as work. In the generative AI model, this cost structure is reversed. Users pay for access while their interactions perform the substantive functions of system improvement. Reprompts identify failure modes. Corrections supply preference signal. Iterative refinements generate the comparison data on which reinforcement learning from human feedback depends. The labor of improvement is real. What has changed is that it is now performed by paying customers rather than compensated workers.

This is not a marginal or incidental feature of the business model. It is central to it. The annotation pipelines that underpin large language model development — preference ranking, output evaluation, edge case identification — require enormous volumes of human judgment applied to system outputs. Platforms that employ dedicated annotators bear this cost directly. Generative platforms that sell subscriptions to end users have transferred this cost to the user while adding a fee on top. The user pays to provide the labor that makes the system more valuable, and that increased value is then used to justify charging the user more.

The compounding character of this arrangement distinguishes it from the simpler extraction described in earlier sections. Vanity publishing charges the author once; the platform's benefit from that transaction does not grow over time. Generative platforms capture a compounding return. Each paid interaction im-

proves the model. An improved model justifies higher tiers and expanded capabilities. Expanded capabilities attract more users and more interaction. More interaction generates more training signal. The participant's payment funds their own supersession as the benchmark for what the system should be able to do.

The parallel to unpaid annotation labor is precise. Scale and similar platforms pay human workers — often poorly, but they pay — to evaluate outputs, rank preferences, and flag errors. Generative platforms have not eliminated this function. They have restructured it so that the worker pays the platform for the privilege of performing it, under conditions in which the work itself is not legible as work. The user believes they are consuming a service. They are also, simultaneously, producing the inputs that make the service more valuable to others. The distinction between customer and contributor has been collapsed, and the economic benefit of that collapse flows entirely to the platform.

This dynamic represents the most complete form of the inversion this essay has traced. In vanity publishing, the author pays for something that resembles institutional endorsement. In generative platforms, the user pays for something that resembles a tool, while simultaneously performing the labor that conventional institutions would have had to purchase. The symbolic substitution and the labor substitution have merged into a single transaction. What is purchased is access; what is also delivered, invisibly, is work.

17. Symptom and Structure

When a specific platform is criticized as exemplifying vanity publishing, the criticism often focuses on surface features: the marketing language is hyperbolic, the books appear unremarkable, the promotional claims seem disproportionate to commercial results. These observations may be accurate, but they miss the structural point. The ridiculousness, if that is the right word, is not accidental. It is the visible symptom of an economic model that has detached publication from readership.

When publication is no longer constrained by the need to find an audience, the language surrounding it need no longer be constrained by the need to describe something real. The press releases can become untethered from market performance because market performance is not what the platform is measuring. The claims about reach, visibility, and impact can be expansive because no one's revenue depends on them being accurate. The symbolic apparatus can be elaborate

precisely because the economic substance beneath it is thin.

A structurally grounded critique of such a platform would not primarily note that it seems ridiculous. It would ask the diagnostic questions: where does the platform's revenue come from? How is editorial selection conducted, and what are the consequences of rejection? What does distribution actually deliver? What claims does the platform make about its own institutional function, and how do those claims relate to its economic operation? If the answers reveal a system in which authors are the primary payers, editorial rejection is rare or absent, distribution is limited, and institutional language exceeds institutional reality, then what is being described is the inversion this essay has outlined.

18. Creation Without Reciprocal Risk

The conclusion toward which this analysis points is not primarily about any specific company or platform. It is about what happens to a cultural institution when its economic structure inverts. Publishing, in its traditional form, is a system in which institutions claim authority over what is worth making available and accept financial risk in proportion to that claim. When that system inverts, when the institution claims authority without accepting risk, and when the creator accepts risk without receiving the institutional investment that risk is supposed to purchase, something important has been broken.

What has been broken is the reciprocal relationship between creator and institution. In the conventional model, the publisher and the author are jointly committed to the work's public reception: the publisher because it has financial exposure, the author because the work is theirs. This alignment is imperfect and is frequently violated, but it structures the relationship as one of shared interest. When the publisher has already been paid by the author, the alignment dissolves. The publisher's interest in the work's success is now only incidental, a matter of reputation rather than revenue.

The deeper consequence is what this does to the cultural function of publishing. Publishing is not merely a commercial arrangement. It is, or has been, a mechanism for bringing work before audiences, for organizing cultural attention, for maintaining the connection between creators and readers that makes a literary culture possible. When the publisher's revenue is decoupled from reader demand, this function is not abolished but attenuated. Publication continues to occur in its administrative sense, books appear, ISBNs are registered,

listings go up, but the institutional investment in connecting those books with readers weakens in proportion to the weakening of the financial incentive that once drove it.

Vanity publishing matters, then, not because it is embarrassing or low-status, and not because it produces books that are inferior to those of traditional publishers. It matters because it reveals what cultural institutions become when they stop bearing reciprocal risk. Once the creator's desire to be published is the commodity, and once the platform's revenue depends on that desire rather than on the public value of what is created, the institution has ceased to serve the culture it nominally represents. It has become a system for extracting value from the act of trying to participate in that culture.

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