

The qualities of a book, the wants of a dissertation

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Between scholarly writers, especially new ones, and sensitive readers who demand specific qualities in the works they read, there often exists an abiding state of warfare. The reader is the aggressor and the new writer the enemy; the battleground is the editor's overcrowded desk, for the editor is the reader's ombudsman. The issue is the written page, involving clear differences of opinion concerning the level, the demeanour, and the forms of serious discourse. The discrete *casus belli* is the dissertation; and it is the chief object of this paper, in putting the issues forthrightly, to bring about the dissertation's defeat and achieve a creative discursive peace.

Pedantry has been scorned for centuries by those who, equally as serious as, if not indeed more serious than, the pedant, have ever been more humane in their work, seeking to relate the subjects of their investigations and the learned discourses which embody them to the affairs and the ends of man. In the past several generations, however, pedantry has ceased to be a subject for jest and has instead been hallowed by tradition and institutionalized. It is indeed the curse of much contemporary scholarship; but because it is a complex structure it is difficult to attack, even though it is comprised of carefully learned and utterly wretched attitudes. It has therefore flourished relatively undisturbed. Thus has pedantry been enabled to effect a qualitative jump, and instead of being a sportive vagary it has become a ponderous *modus vivendi*. That splendiferous emptiness men once rejected with derision, their descendants have mutated into a discursive anomaly they call the dissertation.

It is a regrettable irony – indeed even a tragic one – that the means by which a scholar in every real sense *creates* himself as scholar is so little studied, so little understood. Far from being simply 'information transference,' a book is a finite estate of

Eleanor Harman + Ian Montagnes

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being. To create such a work requires both conviction and art. The art of writing is perhaps the most important skill the scholar ought to acquire, and it ought to be the subject of faithful attention and practice. But the student does not acquire it; he learns instead the honoured forms of drab discourse, the arid niceties of documentation, and the simple-headed regimens of a proper bibliography. All that he might learn of a really profound and meaningful kind about the nature of the discourse whose exercise will be a large part of his life is relegated to accident. As a result he fails to discover the book as a viable and independent context for man.

The book is, first of all, a humane work which the writer intends to be taken seriously. That the book is humane means that its writer is at all times keenly aware that his book is *him-thinking*, and that therefore the *him* is not only ineradicable, it is the essence of the book. The best work, therefore, will be humanized by virtue of the explicit presence of an estimable man brooding through the work. That the book is humane further implies that in the final analysis its chief importance lies in its relevance to man and his estate. In the most profound sense therefore, a book, by virtue of being a humane work, is a work of human context, an existential event, a potential encounter. The humane book possesses a centre of gravity which is within man.

A book then is a fabric in and of consciousness. Now, one can hardly for a moment pretend that this distinguishes the book from the dissertation, and expect anyone to believe that the dissertation must not also have the same characteristics with respect to consciousness. What I have in mind is quite different. Since a book is a fabric in and of consciousness and since it becomes an existential context for the reader who enters into it, it follows that the book's rootedness in consciousness must be fully and richly exploited as the sub-stratum of all the rest if all the rest is in fact to be achieved. That challenge to roundedness, that wholeness which is of all attributes most subject to the critical examination of the consciousness, must be met. This requires not only all the writer's knowledge but all his fancy as well. To make an estate of the work – a viable and, to the probing consciousness, a veritable and existent estate – is the heavy charge placed upon the author of the book.

This view of the book is based upon many assumptions which will become manifest as we proceed. But one of the most basic tenets is an unshakeable belief that language is a human activity and that it has no more honourable function than to present man-thinking. *Man-thinking* is at every constituting moment of the book mediator between his reader and the world he perceives and incarnates into his own words. Language is a tool only in the sense that it makes man instrumental. That language is a precision instrument with its own objective existence apart from man is the premise which informs the worst dissertations – and for that matter the worst books; that it is a structure of being is the premise of the fully realized book.

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A further critical feature of the book results from the model the author adopts for himself and his work. He may fancy himself as the writer of a dissertation, which is highly specialized and often therefore of little consequence, or he may regard himself simply as a writer, a certain kind of man – one who through his written prose, with serious dignity and with respect for language and discourse as a mode of being, does a human work and *establishes* an aspect of the world. Further, the writer can view his work either as a dissertation, which as a highly specialized form is also a highly restricted one, or he can regard it as an attempt at organic creation through language, different from the greatest books in the language perhaps only by virtue of the fact that it may flow from a lesser man and is devoted to less profound and stirring issues. In both these pairs of alternatives, those choices pertaining to the dissertation involve the acceptance of specialized models; the second choices do not. The writer of the dissertation sees himself as involved in the execution of a complex and erudite ritual for a cohesive, erudite, and minimal audience, and he sees his work as conforming to certain requirements of structure and levels of discourse. The writer of the book on the other hand consciously sees himself as existing within the tradition of his language and literature and regards his work as directed to every man possessed of the requisite wit, learning, and taste to appreciate it. The writer of the dissertation submits to the ritual hazing of his elders, proving to them that he has read his homework; the writer of the book rejects the indignity inherent in so foolish a demonstration. The writer of the dissertation hounds his points to the ground with packs of footnotes while the writer of books, using footnotes, when inescapable, with neither bravado nor timidity, treats his ideas and his evidence as straightforwardly and honourably as he can. He does so out of respect for his work, for his readers, and for himself, not out of a base desire to please his committee or to flatter his director.

At the outset, then, the writer must decide whether his work is to be organic or artificial, humane or academic, an end or a means, and whether he, as author, is to be civil or dull, whether he is to place himself and his work within the mainstream of the viable literary traditions of his culture or to journey the tortuous by-way of the dissertation. Further, he must determine whether he is to write a *natural* form or an unnatural one. In making up his mind on these points, the writer should bear in mind the fact that few scholars, once released from the disciplines of the graduate school, would of their own free will choose subsequently to write a dissertation. Unhappily, of course, there are some senior scholars to whom the form seems to be a natural means of expression. It is such people, one suspects, who invented the form and do the most to perpetuate it.

As a further aid to defining the book, I point to the fact that a book is in daily discourse distinguished from what is called a nonbook. Nonbooks are of several

kinds; but their differences notwithstanding, they all share two common features: they tend to be written for market rather than for intellectual reasons, and they are all means rather than ends. Since their centre of gravity is external to man it is difficult, no matter what their pretensions, to regard them as humane, serious, or dedicated to creating a context in and of the full stuff of consciousness. Of all non-books, the most conspicuous example is the 'coffee-table book.' The latter usually find their market by virtue of their decorative assets rather than from any literary or intellectual merit, or for that matter – since such works are often art books – by significantly serving important aesthetic or historical purposes. Although such books are phenomena of the age of self-improvement, they seem to be of little effect, and in the final analysis they appear to serve much the same purpose as the frilly lampshades one so often sees conspicuously gracing certain front windows.

Another type of nonbook comes into being from giving expression to the desire to gather together bits and pieces of literary materials. Whether such collection is done around a common theme or around a constellation of such themes, it gives strong evidence of the simple desire to collect. The abundance of anthologies and readers attests to this. Perhaps the strength of this drive to anthologize owes much to the lucrative textbook markets, but if this is so, then in this respect we live now at a fortunate time. The abundance of relatively inexpensive paperback books seems to have ended the heyday of the big and expensive classroom reader. Whatever the case, the fact remains that the anthology is perhaps the most common form of the nonbook, and its rationale is identical to that of the coffee-table book, which appears to be that there is justification and indeed even some virtue in the snippet approach to the study of the long progress of human achievement.

There are other nonbooks which are also alien to the notion of book as humane, though these, by and large, are without attractive markets, thus making the motives for their compilation less comprehensible. I have in mind both the symposium and the *festschrift*. At their worst, these two nonbooks are empty forms of flattery; and even though at their best they may constitute major contributions to knowledge, yet publishers have grown wary of them. Like the coffee-table book, some symposia and *festschriften* are dedicated to vanity; like the anthology, their parts are often disparate; like both, they are in general mundane and without interest to any save the specialist with a marked tolerance for the dull, the inane, and the inconsequential. Still, both the *festschrift* and the symposium are published, even fairly bad ones. Vanity and the amazing support vanity can generate sometimes constitute so powerful and insistent a force that the publisher finds it difficult to resist; he accepts the work unenthusiastically, and brings out a small printing.

There are more profound traits than market and vanity, however, which the

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genres of nonbooks have in common, and these are the features which perhaps distinguish them most significantly from the book. The coffee-table book is likely to be deficient in thoughtfulness and in coming to grips with a problem, though it may be both synthetic and programmatic. The anthology often rates somewhat higher in thoughtfulness but again fails to grapple with the issue. The symposium and the festschrift at their best can exhibit thoughtfulness and thoroughness, but common emphases, perspectives, values, and judgements are absent.

In short, nonbooks are marred by the absence of probity, of unity, and of responsibility. Each of these terms, save perhaps responsibility, is clear enough. *Probity* designates that quality of being at once both significant and illuminating, and *unity* is the coming-togetherness of the work into a whole. *Responsibility* is in one respect the obligation to treat the subject in the fashion it deserves, which the word ordinarily means. But it implies more than this, for the proper way of treating a subject is thoughtful, analytic (or synthetic), programmatic and exhaustive, fully rounded, taking hold of a problem. Works so treated achieve that marvellous three-dimensionality characteristic of the good book. Each of these three terms – probity, unity, responsibility – is an important criterion of the book and must be present; if one or another is absent, a nonbook results.

The dissertation may lack any or indeed all these characteristics; thus it is clear that the dissertation is another genre of the nonbook. It is in all probability for failure to honour the criterion of probity that dissertations most commonly fail to be books. The dissertation never achieves that quality of being historically, socially, conceptually, aesthetically – *humanely* – significant. The reason does not lie solely in the fact that the writer has written a dissertation instead of a book. There are some writers who deserve no greater challenge than the dissertation. I am concerned here, however, rather with that person who could achieve probity but who is precluded from doing so by the requirements of a system committed to a form to which probity is alien – because the work is usually carefully kept minimal, cut off from any but the most apprentice-like intellectual pretensions or achievements. Its mass is thus limited, and it is dedicated to embodying certain conventions of purpose and procedure.

The dissertation is likely, under even the worst of circumstances, to exhibit some unity of concept, owing to the fact that phenomena have been selected, an inquiry conducted, and data organized in relation to the 'problem' which is the core of the dissertation. But it is the rare dissertation that does not fail when it comes to unity of address. 'Address' involves a complex of factors – the strategy compounded from both the consideration and the demonstration of the question; the attitude toward the subject of the work as well as toward its hypothetical readers

(who should be ever present in the writer's mind during the act of composition); and the surface of the book, by which I mean the text and its condition as a prose continuum.

The strategy of consideration in the dissertation is not only likely to be acceptable, but is often in the vanguard of its field with respect to methods, values, and objectives. Coherence of demonstration, however, is usually found wanting. Most dissertation directors doubtless are dedicated chiefly – or at least earnestly – to the education and the success of their students, but it is nonetheless true that often the writer is never permitted to act as a free agent, blessed with the ability to perceive a condition of man or the world and trained to disclose it in a professional fashion. Accordingly, alongside a virtuosity in the use of advanced techniques of demonstration, he is often likely to exhibit an unnatural reliance upon such supports as the skilful hedge, the evasive footnote, and the demonstration of the inconsequential or the obvious. The example of a recent dissertation of more than ordinary interest will demonstrate this point. In the context of a fresh and insightful study of a certain people, the writer of the dissertation, when it came to the point where he wished to write of their religion, was required to go back through the literature, reviewing all the attitudes of anthropologists toward religion in general before he was free to make his own points. This is not an extreme case. The experiences of many editors will provide additional instances where it has appeared that the writer of the dissertation felt he had to demonstrate the obvious before he could invoke the concepts whose existence clearly implied the basic facts or earlier work. Let the dissertation writer beware who abandons his prerogatives of choice to someone else. Even the noblest research director may push a student into digging about in recondite corners of the area of his own concern. To abdicate one's responsibility of choice to another risks the failure to achieve probity. The student faces for a time the opportunity to choose what he will write; at some point he arrives at the best of all motives, which is to say that he wants to write on a given subject *because* it is significant; the failure to seize this chance and instead to let pressures of time or power coerce him into a project because it is easy or because someone else wants it is in all probability to deliver himself and his work over to a poverty of pertinence.

Attitude toward subject, which is also a function of unity, varies greatly in the dissertation – whether because the subject itself is trivial, or because the writer's relationship to it is. In a book the writer is more likely free to go where interest and the logic of inquiry take him. To the extent that the dissertation-writer may be coerced into alien directions, to that same extent is his interest likely to flag and his attitude toward the subject to fluctuate. Further, it is sometimes difficult for the dissertation-writer to visualize that hypothetical and ideal reader whom, in the fullness of his pertinence and intellectual originality, he ought to address. Instead, he

is ever aware of his all too certain actual readers – his committee. He must write for them, a minimal and often – in any real sense – his least important audience.

In the dissertation again, as for that matter is true in the bad book as well, unity is often violated with respect to surface, notably in the level of discourse, the level of diction, and the level of rhetoric. It is the mastery of these which further distinguishes the writer who can write from the one who cannot, and the dissertation from the good book. For the best writers, these surfaces require little attention; for the worst, little attention is possible. But for the majority of writers, who are placed between these two poles, assiduous reworking, whether alone or with the help of an editor, will induce such unity.

In the book responsibility is reflected in that intellectual attitude which respects both the thesis, treating it ever seriously, and the spirit of inquiry whose sole interest is to disclose all relevant analysis and synthesis. Dissertations frequently either regard the thesis with a seriousness it may not merit, which is a kind of intellectual sentimentality, or, more rarely, undervalue the proposition, betraying cynicism.

It is in the adequacy and clarity of demonstration, which are functions of responsibility, that most writers of dissertations fall into serious and often terminal error. In the dissertation phenomena may be overanalyzed, underanalyzed, inappropriately analyzed, and irrelevantly analyzed. This last error eventuates from the misapprehension of the nature of the thesis, and is not as uncommon as one might suspect. And while clarity of inquiry is largely a function of positive and creative solutions, it is also an independent quality of mind that abhors cant and abjures passing fashions in the disciplines.

There are other traits which, while they do not inevitably characterize the book, almost never mark the dissertation. They may be considered secondary characteristics of the book. The most notable member of this secondary cluster is what I shall call the presumption of authority. The writer of the book and the writer of the dissertation both have sought to master the facts of one area of human concern. But the treatment of the data is markedly different in the book from that in the dissertation. The writer of the dissertation is tyrannized both by his facts and by his discipline (although the rise of interdisciplinary studies is somewhat ameliorating this latter condition). The writer of the book, on the other hand, while respecting his data, yet is liberated by them. He is at ease with facts, using them adroitly in support of his argument. This difference in attitude, deriving from different initial estimations of one's role with respect to one's project, makes different end products. There is no easy reckoning of the transformation when a writer regards himself as virtuoso of evidence, thesis, field, and expression. A corollary to the presumption of authority is the generation of freedom to depart from slavish reliance upon the citation of the

facts and views of predecessors and to range creatively and with confidence over the domain.

In the best books, there develops from this freedom a sense of urgency which seldom blesses the dissertation. It comes also from the prerogative allowed the author under such circumstances to presume both his own authority and the importance of his work. This, then, is the second element in that cluster of secondary characteristics that distinguish the book.

A third item in this cluster is the presumption of the value of the expression of one's self when defining an idea, a judgement, or a fact. At the same time, this presumption entails the recognition of the privilege of invoking and making operative this value. It stresses recognition of the importance of one's self as ground for one's views, thus opening to the author the opportunity to engage on that voyage of simultaneous self-discovery and phenomenon-discovery which provides the foundation for his presumption of the importance of his work and his presumption of authority. The implicit assumption in the writing of a book is that the author himself is important. The assumptions concerning the writer of a dissertation, it need hardly be said, often appear to run quite contrary to this view. This presumption of the importance of one's self to the inquiry, besides having profound ontological implications, has more readily apparent and exceedingly attractive consequences as well, for it permits the expression of the writer's own personality in his prose to the limits of his ability to work in the language.

I am writing here about the worst dissertation and the best book. But not all books, not even all good books, are of the kind I have been discussing. While the book which is humane, which establishes a significant human context, which in roundedness and credibility creates a field of consciousness – extending the reader's consciousness by adroitly, trenchantly, and creatively directing it toward new phenomena or to new perspectives on old ones – is in my judgement the best book, its number represents perhaps but a small percentage of the books published each year. Most works are either aimed in the same direction as the best book, but are notably deficient in some respects, or else they are of a quite different sort. The book we have discussed so far is the thesis book. There is also, however, the non-thesis book, and many terminal graduate discourses are likely to be of this type for the plain reason that it is in most respects an easier kind of project to undertake.

The thesis book is primarily creative, establishing through originality of concept and argument a position which has not previously existed or is not generally accepted. A non-thesis book, on the other hand, is content to describe or to explain that which already exists. Non-thesis books are exemplified by some archaeological studies and certain histories and biographies, which are intended to do no more than record the verifiable events of the life of a period or of a man. Now we know

as a matter of fact that no presentation of history or biography proceeds without selection and that that selection invariably betrays the presence of value as a principle of selection. This value is a point of view. The non-thesis book therefore is one which, while it is indubitably written from a point of view, yet exists within an unquestioned intellectual tradition and does not specifically argue a case or offer distinctively new or importantly modified points of view. The non-thesis book is inherently conservative, and the non-thesis dissertation is the safest kind of dissertation to write.

The ontological nature of the non-thesis book is as unlike that of the thesis book as a photograph of Cézanne is different from one of his self-portraits. The non-thesis book is a sketch or a profile of what incontestably exists; unlike the thesis book, it does not have as its objective the establishment of an aspect of reality. The only structures the non-thesis book must incorporate are the immanent ones of the phenomenon or process with which it is concerned, as these structures are traditionally accepted to be, within the author's own tradition. By definition, therefore, there is unlikely to be any major disputation over the nature of those structures or their interrelationships or their significance. This is not to say that there may not be scalding controversy over the details as represented. But unless the whole premise of observation is rejected by virtue of an opposing thesis, this controversy is certain to be restricted to a question of the adequacy or the reliability of the account.

So much, then, for a brief overview of the most striking inherent differences which distinguish the book from the dissertation. But there are other distinguishing factors which are not inherent but which often – even though extraneous – have a determining influence upon the work, for they can be insidious and insistent. They amount to a concerted power which often prevents the young scholar from producing a book in his first extended job of professional writing. Wholly external to the writer, this power is the combined product of tradition, the nature of graduate education, and the role and personality of the dissertation director. Tradition has it that rather than being the first act of the scholar, the dissertation is the last act of the student. The dissertation is viewed therefore as the work not of a professional but of a pre-professional. Thus the writer of the dissertation is forced by tradition to resort to the writing of a form that is dysfunctional, because in its primitive form the dissertation will be read by few and because no publisher will in all probability consider publishing it as it stands. At the same time, tradition places a great value upon publication, with the result that the young writer finds himself caught in a vise between forces, being required to remain a student, presenting what often amounts to little more than an underwrought and overextended term paper for his dissertation, and at the same time being required to publish as a

means of advancing his professional career.

The agency of tradition is the graduate school which, after the model of the rest of the university, treats the graduate student as student. The graduate school seldom conceives of its scholars in any way profoundly different from that in which undergraduate schools think of their freshmen students. It therefore permits the perpetuation of tradition by approving the research of a trivial proposition and its incorporation into what, in the world of 'real' communication, can only be called a dysfunctional form. We may consider ourselves blessed that there is, here and there, some evidence of the weakening of this system. At one university recently the PH.D. candidate, having been examined on his research, was discharged with the degree promised and no dissertation required. He was instructed rather, and quite simply, to produce a book based upon his research. The system that generally prevails, however, is but another instance of the great pains American society takes to postpone the maturation of its young.

There is every reason why, in this day of PH.D. overproduction, the requirement to write a dissertation should be dropped and the requirement to write a book substituted. Such an action might impede PH.D. production, enrich scholarship, take young scholars in the serious terms the great majority of them deserve, and give them early acquaintance with that viable form of communication they will use throughout their productive lives. There can be little doubt that this more creative and worthwhile use of human energies would constitute its own reward. In addition the economics of learned book publishing, which militate against the publication of the dissertation owing to its negligible market and the subsequent high cost of publication, would be affected, I believe for the better, in view of the fact that labour would be saved and better and more marketable works would eventuate.

Under some circumstances, such as the presence of an intellectually imperialistic director of research, one of the worst faults of the dissertation is perpetrated. In the good dissertation, as in the book, the genetic principles of the work's growth are inherent in the field, the thesis, the data, the inquiry, and above all the writer. But in the unfortunate circumstances provided by the aggressive director, the genetic principle is an external one. Instead of conducting research after his own interests and in his own fashion, the student investigates some minor area of the research director's field of interest. His research thus becomes but a footnote to the research of his professor, and the sole achievement may well be only that the senior man will not have to conduct some research for which he himself had little time and perhaps even little inclination. Under such circumstances there is practically no possibility of a book, and the whole project of the dissertation, once the degree has been granted, had best be broken down to some simple stage at which the parts may be studied,

reassembled, and permitted to grow after their own dictates, perhaps into one or two papers. Inevitably and wastefully some large part of the work will have to be abandoned.

If the writing of dissertations is to be discouraged and the writing of books encouraged, it is obvious that profound changes must come about in the requirements for graduate degrees. The graduate schools must revise their ideas and expectations regarding that major writing project upon which the awarding of the degree in large measure depends. Further, steps must be taken to insure the complete intellectual freedom of the candidate, perhaps by distinguishing his research director from his dissertation director. As an added step it might be well, as often as possible, to include a professional editor as a full member of the candidate's committee.

All that is wrong with graduate school writing as it tends to be practised today is symbolized by the existence and extraordinary popularity of *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* by Kate L. Turabian (University of Chicago Press). While undeniably useful within its limited terms, this manual, in wide use among dissertation writers, makes no mention of the fact that the dissertation is, or ought to be, a form of discourse. On the contrary, sole attention is given to the mechanics of presentation. That this is so reflects the staunch prevailing attitude toward the dissertation, namely that it is not expected that the doctoral research or the extended statement of that research and its arguments will be of consequence. All that matters is that the work be written in a scrupulously traditional fashion. Footnotes, most often the curse of the dissertation as far as the publisher is concerned (for they are overused to the point not only of vice, but, worse, to utter dependence of mind), are treated in thirty of the manual's 103 pages – an amount considerably greater than that directed to any other topic. In contrast, the discussion of the physical presentation of the body of the text itself is accomplished in twelve pages. While on its own terms the manual is reliable and beneficial, its existence without the concomitant existence of another manual devoted to those vastly more important dimensions of the thesis in terms of its nature as an achievement in extended and serious discourse is profoundly revealing. The attentions of the writer must early be fixed upon the humane and genetic nature of the book as the consummate form of mature discourse.