

Editor's Column: My Professional Advice (to Graduate Students)

THIS ISSUE OF *PMLA* COLLECTS RESPONSES BY A NUMBER of scholars to the question “Why major in literature—what do we tell our students?” The question itself—that it needs to be posed at all—already reflects a state of affairs removed from business as usual. Indeed, one could take almost every word of the question (*why, major, literature, we, etc.*) and use it as a point of departure for a lengthy disquisition on the condition of our *métier* nowadays, an exercise I will not rehearse here since almost every professional venue appears to be engaged in it.¹ The urgency and tenor of the interventions gathered here reveal that they are written in that “recurrent epistemological structure” which Paul de Man identified as the mode of crisis (14). It would take a detailed analysis of each of these contributions to show how they articulate the structure of knowledge to which de Man alludes; yet any reader will detect their shared anxiety in the fact that, although written separately, they seem—surprisingly enough—to be in polemical dialogue with one another.

The crisis around which these texts revolve and that each names in its distinct fashion is known intimately to us all: there is no longer a consensus on the object of literary studies or on the justifications for pursuing this field as an intellectual project. The attitude we take toward this situation as scholars and individuals may range from the mournful to the celebratory; but when we consider our predicament in the larger institutional milieu of the university—a context that consistently demands that we highlight and overplay the importance of what we do if limited resources are going to flow our way—we are confronted with the weakness that arises from our

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dismantling of our own house. The question “Why major in literature—what do we tell our students?” could be put to us indistinctly by our students or by our administrators, and judging from the collective impression left by the responses reproduced here, it is difficult to say which one of the two groups of questioners would be more perplexed by the results.

The difficulties begin to multiply when we realize that the question posed to the contributors is, in fact, two queries: “Why major in literature?” and “What do we tell our students?” The former—why major in literature?—seems vexing to answer at first because it forces us to decide immediately whether it elicits a self-justification or a propagandistic statement: should I explain why *I* chose to study literature or why *anyone* should do so? Yet one can envision a satisfactory answer that continually oscillates between these two poles and that uses the ensuing tension productively. The second question—what do we tell our students?—appears more innocuous since it seems merely to ask for a report on the answer we typically offer to the first question. And yet such a reading necessarily represses the other possible interpretation of the question—what de Man would call its rhetorical reading—in which the query is not a request for the information we would give a student but rather an expression of our dismay at being unable to produce any answer to the first question: what (indeed) do we tell our students? How (in fact) can we answer that second question, when we and everyone around us cannot even agree on the putative object of its questioning? What *do* we tell our students, when we are seized by an inarticulateness that arises from knowing that to begin to answer that question honestly would require us to beg many others?

The decision to pursue an undergraduate degree in literature is nowadays linked in the student's mind to some instrumental consideration: students think that a degree in a literature major will enable them to obtain a better job (or admission to a better professional school) and, increasingly less so, that it will afford them a more

satisfying adult life. The first of these considerations explains why currently language and literature majors are overwhelmingly double majors, since they see a concentration in literature as a supplement to their main intellectual and professional pursuit—their “real” major. The second one accounts for the dwindling numbers of language and literature majors (except in Spanish, where the instrumental consideration trumps everything else), since the professionalization of the university experience leaves little room for a concern with intangible pleasures. Most of our answers to the why-major-in-literature question adopt the pragmatic perspective that we detect in our students, and we place all hope for the future in the felicity of that convergence.

In the case of graduate students, we deem the question of why one should study literature settled; after all, who would pursue a doctorate in that discipline without having the sort of abiding commitment that makes the question superfluous? And yet a graduate student lives in a context in which, if anything, the issues that have surfaced above are intensified, since they are at stake in every aspect of graduate education. The avowed superfluosity of the “why” question in the graduate milieu belies the profound effects wrought by the disappearance of a workable consensus on the object of study and of a rationale for articulating an intellectual project around it. Paramount among these is that in the absence of a common intellectual enterprise, the material and institutional conditions in which this activity takes place suddenly become visible, as it were, and acquire a new importance. We may no longer have the consensual authority to prescribe the kind of intellectual activity found in our graduate programs, but we still control stipend levels, summer support, teaching loads, health insurance, and other conditions that determine as an aggregate the nature and ease of the context in which that activity occurs. I would venture to say that the current drive toward the unionization of graduate students in private universities is directly related to

this dynamic. Unfortunately, if my assessment is correct, the achievement of bargaining leverage with respect to the material conditions surrounding graduate study will only intensify the compensatory logic created by our inability to arrive at the simplest common denominator of our collective project. I do not think that our current situation is reversible, for its root cause, the professionalization of the university, is merely the academic manifestation of larger historical events and conditions over which we hold little sway. This is also why I am not moved by the ever-louder complaints that we are professionalizing our students too early. If the increased concern with the professional dimension of our discipline results from the loss of consensus regarding our object of study, we cannot decry the former if we are unable to address the latter. Hence, my comments on our predicament are diagnostic rather than prescriptive and are my own rendition of the pragmatism that some view as a symptom of our most salient weakness and defeat.

While writing this column, I came across an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by Robert A. Gross, professor of American studies at the College of William and Mary, in which he transcribed the text of a document—a contract, really—that he presents to students who ask him to be their thesis adviser. I reproduce that document here to illustrate how graduate education, no longer a clearly and unanimously defined enterprise, has taken to creating its own ad hoc navigational charts for the use of the parties involved:

Let me make explicit what I expect in a dissertation and how I see my roles as your adviser. A doctoral dissertation in American studies must stake out a historical, cultural, or literary problem, explicate its significance in relation to the existing scholarship, make clear how the inquiry engages broad questions about American society or culture, and then lay out a clear research design, by which the intellectual problem will be addressed. The investigation must identify a body of pertinent primary

sources, published and unpublished, and describe clearly the methods, approaches, and theoretical presuppositions it brings to bear upon the subject. In describing and analyzing the sources, the dissertation must draw upon and relate its conclusions to all the relevant scholarship, including books, journal articles, and other dissertations. The conclusion should generalize from the specific findings of the study to the larger issues the study engages.

As to my roles, I see myself as your principal editor, whose job it is to note errors of spelling and grammar, identify infelicities of expression (awkwardness, clichés, unclear formulations), and set forth problems in the larger presentation, especially in the structure of chapters or the work as a whole. Secondly, I read your work as a critical scholar, assessing the logic of your argument, the pertinence and the persuasiveness of your evidence, and the acuity of your analysis. Third, I will offer suggestions of pertinent books, articles, sources, and propose various approaches, methods, lines of interpretation. Finally, despite the critical stance all these roles involve, I am also your chief cheerleader, who will do everything possible to enable you to produce a first-rate dissertation and secure a top academic job. Whatever faults your work may show along the way, they will not dispel my support and enthusiasm for your career.

What do I expect in return? First, that you send me a text that is always spell-checked, grammatical, documented with footnotes in appropriate style, and as clear as you can make it. Second, that you respond to my comments and, if you choose to ignore or reject them, tell me why in an accompanying letter. I get frustrated and cranky when I invest lots of time in reading and reflecting on student work and my suggestions seem to get lost in space. Third, it is useful for you to recognize that both of us operate under time pressures, with all sorts of obligations and deadlines to juggle, and that you alert me when I should expect to receive draft chapters and leave me roughly a month to read and comment on your work. Ordinarily, I return manuscripts within two weeks' time, and a month is my outer limit. Beyond that, you have a right to complain.

Gross's "contract" is exemplary in its attempt to detail the expectations and responsibilities inherent in the adviser-advisee relationship.² And yet by the time students are ready to do research on their dissertation topics—the moment at which such a compact would be established—they should have acquired a great deal of the knowledge they will need to be effective participants in their future professional careers. Fully aware of this fact, graduate departments increasingly resort to offering seminars or workshops for their students on professional concerns such as writing a curriculum vitae, composing grant proposals, and participating in conferences and symposia. The underlying assumption of this practice is that such knowledge cannot be transmitted in the content-driven and ritualistic classroom, so we dispense it through a different type of arrangement, but one that maintains the student-teacher dynamic in place.

The reality is, of course, that if alerted to keep their eyes open, students should be able to glean the professional education that they require from every dimension of their graduate experience. With this principle in mind, I have drawn up throughout my years as a graduate instructor a list of recommendations that I share with students in the first weeks of their graduate careers. Its overarching goal is to make students vigilant to the daily opportunities they have to distill the knowledge that they will need to create effective professional personas. Predictably, the items vary greatly in importance and scope; what they have in common is that I invariably discovered them after I could have benefitted from them—sometimes at great personal and professional cost:

- Keep in mind that during the first years of your future career as a professor, your pedagogical repertoire will probably depend a great deal on courses that you took and on readings, bibliographic material, photocopies, and other instruments of scholarship that you read or received while in graduate school. Do not throw away anything that you may use in the future to plan a course or a seminar. Buy a filing cabinet at the beginning of your graduate career, and devise a consistent system to organize such materials.
- Understand that conducting a good class is a skill that can be learned just as any other; rid yourself of the widespread notion that people are either born teachers or not. Take the time to become aware of your professors' classroom strategies: how the tempo of the class is set, the tactics used to elicit participation and sustain discussion, the balance established between presenting material and allowing the group to arrive at it. Even ineffectual teaching performances can serve as useful workshops for an attentive pedagogue in training. Take liberal note of what works and what does not in all aspects of the classroom.
- Remember that in the vast majority of academic jobs, you will be required and expected to be—at least at the beginning of your career—a generalist. This applies to the usual divisions of the undergraduate and graduate curricula by centuries or movements, but it applies as well, for instance, to genres and critical perspectives. There are myriad intellectual reasons why limiting the range of courses you take while in graduate school is foolish, but if they don't convince you, this fact should: you never know what you will be called on to teach as an assistant professor. Many students arrive in their first year of graduate school knowing exactly in which area they will specialize, and they see taking courses outside it as an obligation and a chore. Some programs unwittingly encourage this view by allowing students to shape their reading lists according to their individual interests. Chances are that anything outside your area that you do not read while in graduate school will go unread.
- Take as many courses as you can outside your department. Open yourself to other literatures and other critical approaches. The more narrowly you define the parameters of your scholarship, the more you preclude opportunities for meaningful contributions to your field of study.

- When you write a paper for a course, do not tailor your paper to the professor in that course. Work to arrive at a critical voice of your own. Your discourse and your effort should be uniform throughout your various papers. If in your view the professor's performance is lacking somehow, remember that the authors you have read are excellent and that you owe *them* a good paper.
- Learn the *MLA Style Manual* rules and conventions for bibliographic citation thoroughly, and apply them accurately and consistently. If you use them for every paper you write in graduate school, by the time you graduate you will know them by heart.
- Do not attach yourself too dearly to your writing; learn to erase, modify, and, above all, discard anything you have written. Just because *you* wrote something doesn't mean it is clear, exact, or right.
- Learn a word-processing program backward and forward. Make it second nature, until you are able to compose directly on the screen with it. Become completely familiar with computers in general: they are without question the future of publishing, manuscript submission, and information retrieval. Become familiar with Web writing as well: this is the future of teaching.
- Keep in mind that a dissertation is an academic exercise and not a book. Be original, but also understand the limits that must be placed on the thesis by its nature. The book will come later. Beyond a certain point, every year that you spend writing your dissertation counts against you. Stick to the schedule you and your thesis adviser design for the completion of the stages of your work.
- As much as you can, familiarize yourself with the inner workings of the institution where you do your graduate work. If you remain in this profession, you will spend more than half your life in the academic environment, and it is in your best interest to know it well. The same goes for the structure of your department. I am continually amazed that graduate students often have no understanding of the difference between an assistant professor and a full professor (or of the process that takes us from being one to the other) or how department chairs differ from chaired professors.
- Avoid taking sides or otherwise getting involved in disagreements or fights between faculty members in your department. Resist any attempt by a faculty member to involve you in a conflict he or she has with a colleague. You will only lose regardless of whom you side with.
- Some professors will want to be your confidants. They will provide you with information you should not have to receive; information you should not give. Identify this situation for what it is, realize its dangers, and if you decide to walk into it nonetheless, do so with eyes wide open.
- The friends you make in graduate school will be the first network you will have as a professional. Your continued relationships will be helpful for, among other things, placing your students and, more generally, for keeping in touch with your field outside your chosen area of specialization.
- From your first year onward, think of yourself as a fully invested member of a professional field. Make every effort to participate in all scholarly and social activities sponsored by your department: guest lectures, job talks, workshops, receptions, and so on. Like any other, this profession includes a lot of conventional, codified behavior that—to paraphrase Yogi Berra—you can observe by watching.
- Read critical articles on works outside your field. Remember that criticism is a professional language game and that you are trying to get a sense of what critical moves are allowed and judged successful in an engagement with a text. There is no reason why you should restrict your repertoire to the moves of critics working in your field.
- Be aware of your position in the departmental hierarchy, but do not be afraid to speak your mind as long as you can justify your opinions on intellectual grounds. People will respect you for thoughtful assertiveness.
- Understand that graduate school is as much a psychological environment as an intellectual

one—at times more so. Departments tend to take on all the trappings of family life: tensions, scapegoating, alliances, favoritism, secrets, and the like. Realize that this is perhaps inevitable but also that, although you can't choose your relationship with your family, you *can* decide how much energy and time you are going to put into this dimension of your department, even if sometimes it doesn't feel that way.

Our undergraduates blissfully know little about our professional life; this is in all likelihood one reason some of them choose us as models and decide to become academics. And if the difference between an undergraduate and a graduate student is but one summer, we must ensure that for prospective graduate students the end of that summer marks both their loss of innocence about what we do and the beginning of a professional education in which they will learn by themselves as much as from us.

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NOTES

¹ See, e.g., "Conference."

² At times the contractual perspective surfaces fittingly as a reproach to us for not keeping our end of the bargain. See Nelson and Lovitts.

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