

Some Distinctive Characteristics of Modern Scholarship

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The conditions of my assignment require, at the outset, a warning. The word scholarship is general and extensive – so much so, that it does not really admit of definition. Hence in characterizing such a subject one can do no more than suggest a set of generalities; I must trust to your knowledge and judgment for the necessary qualifying and limiting of their scope. It is obvious that to whatever may be said about scholarship there will be exceptions, notable and indefinitely numerous. I must likewise rely on your familiarity with various fields of research to supply the examples and the reasoning that cannot be given here: the short time at our disposal, and not my wish, is responsible for any appearance of dogma without proof.

I believe that if one had to describe modern scholarship to a visitor from Mars, one might succeed in doing it by explaining six pairs of tendencies – some being purposes, others being consequences. Together, these character traits might limn a fair portrait of present assumptions and activities. But since all scholarship, past and present, possesses some underlying unity, the portion called modern must first be seen against the general outline of its antecedents.

We need not go back for our contrast to Alexandria in the third century B.C. or to the Middle Ages and Renaissance. I think that the cosmopolitan eighteenth century, with its many academies producing papers, and the nineteenth, with its societies and congresses, furnish a kind of measure by which the twentieth century forms and ways of scholarship may be gauged. The first, most patent difference between then and now is size. It can be expressed in the pair of terms *Volume* and *System*. Thanks to the social revolution variously called liberal or democratic, the scholarly population has become very large: public schools and universities have multiplied, and so have the means of getting there. Private and public grants are widely available. Scholarly work has become a paying career – no need to have a patron or a private income.

Nor is the scholarly output limited to the academy. The whole world has been infected by the virus of research and adds to the gross scholarly product. Any well-trained college graduate can find a job as researcher on a magazine, in industry, in a bank, a private foundation, or a government bureau. The daily mail is full of reports, honest or tendentious, born of some species of research, which follows at least the forms of scholarly work.

This mass production for a mass age has been made possible by the growth of what I will call System. Its principal parts are: libraries, reference works, journals, and university presses. Speaking as I am to scholars and not to Martians, I need hardly expatiate on the nature and role of these institutions. We tend to take them for granted, as if they had always existed in their current guise. But we should recall that such things as library science and the uniform catalog card, the notion and possibility of public access to all collections, the faith that anything can be looked up if only one knows where to go – all this is twentieth-century innovation. Likewise, specialists need to be reminded that the total number of published lists, repertories, manuals, guides, digests, books of facts, and single-subject encyclopedias is enormous. With the computer at hand, entire publishing concerns have found success in bringing out or reprinting these shortcuts to research. You can look up in a single book the names and biographies of notable animals in fiction and fact, and you can find a comparable roster of all the governors of the United States since 1789. Besides which, there are valuable lists of lists, reference books about reference books.

As for journals, they proliferate like rabbits as specialties divide like amoebas – or as contributors grow impatient with slow-publishing quarterlies and start a new organ of dissemination. There are seventy-one philosophical journals for a constituency which, if divided evenly, would provide each with a subscription list of perhaps three hundred. We write faster than we read, and the steady stream of half-price sale catalogs from university presses shows that the production of scholarly books for rare readers is as copious as that of journals.

The reverse side of Volume and System is *Inflation* and *Repetition*. Inflation is the result of what William James called the Ph.D. octopus and its fated offspring, “Publish or Perish.” The assumption behind both is that every member of the academic force can be a productive scholar – certainly a novel idea in the history of scholarship. It is bound to yield an inflated product, because the assumption is false. Formerly, a scholar who published did so for fame and the public good; now he does so for promotion and the survival of a young family. Again, the old scholar might devote a lifetime to a large subject and publish on

the brink of the grave. Now, after the dissertation's painful birth, the scholar must give signs of fertility every couple of years. Hence, the articles that justify his existence can only deal with small points. The "original contribution" that they make, if any, is a matter of detail or interpretation of detail. The footnote that it deserves is therefore blown up into an article, and what should be an article becomes a book. How are these balloons inflated? By repetition: all the surrounding facts already on record are repeated by way of introduction and conclusion, to provide the novel point with a setting – a chip of diamond in a massive ring.

This practice has curious side-effects. Since the new-style scholar prepares the launching of his small squib by reading the latest periodical literature, he often fails to notice that his discovered fact or new view was anticipated by a worker of the 1880s or 90s, who set it down – inconspicuously – in its proper place, a footnote in a large work covering many topics. Indeed, in the modern scholarly hubbub, a point is scarcely visible unless the originator carries on about it at length.

A worse by-product of inflation is that it defeats the very purpose of compulsory scholarship: that purpose was to engineer the growth of knowledge by having as many trained workers as possible add their findings to the edifice. The outcome in fact is that the heaping up of inflated books and papers steadily increases the unlikelihood of synthesis. Plowing through the mass of reports lengthens the task, while it also confuses the mind through exposure to minutiae that look important because they occupy space.

At this point we touch the borders of the next pair of qualities: *Specialism* and *Inadequacy*. The first of these is an attitude and a practice that, again, can do without much analysis here. Specialism is a ubiquitous feature of modern civilization and its rationale is well understood: "There is so much to know that the field must be split up. You can do your job thoroughly only if you narrow your purview. I'll work in one little corner without going into yours – so kindly leave mine alone." This outlook makes no provision for bringing the bits together; it protects the specialist from general criticism; and it leads to the creation of special vocabularies that further divide and protect, putting the new knowledge out of the reach of everybody except the producers.

One may in fact question whether the product is knowledge. In matters relating to mind and spirit, and not to physical matters, knowledge does not exist for society unless widely known and felt – and used. Specialism keeps its findings arcane, and consequently what the journals enclose is at best infor-

mation. The name data-bank could just as well apply to them. The so-called knowledge explosion, at least in the humanities and historical sciences, is mainly an explosion of the library stacks.

In those same subjects, to which usage assigns the word *scholarship*, rather than science, the failure to disseminate general results is surely an inadequacy. But there is another, which also derives from the split and scattering of specialism. Gaetano Salvemini discussed it many years ago as the abandonment of the encyclopedic ideal. No scholar, however conscientious, can look at all there is to see before framing his conclusions. The archives, the records, the “literature,” the libraries of presidential papers – all ensure incompleteness. For this reason, E. M. Forster, who was classically trained, used to insist that modern scholarship should be called pseudo-scholarship, because its power is gone; only its aim and method remain. It has lost the old virtue of speaking only after having examined the whole of the evidence. *Pseudo* is too harsh a word, suggesting as it does pretence if not fakery. But the paradox is true that the more we specialize and accumulate data, the less is thoroughness attainable; so that uncertainty grows in proportion as the store of facts gets bigger and bigger.

By way of compensation, the uneasy mind concentrates on the single detail, which brings about the tyranny of factuality – in the public conscience as well as the scholarly. What may be called the rhetoric of fact, that is, the compelling of belief by a loose but long succession of small items, is evident in modern biography, which has multiplied its resources by the new device of oral history. In consequence the common reader has become obsessed with minor accuracy. Publishers, for example, receive indignant letters about trivial mistakes in novels, and many scholars turn book reviews into lists of errata, both groups overlooking large errors of reasoning or probability.

The general tendencies so far surveyed give rise to a contrary impulse, an urge to react against the simple view that scholarship consists in collecting and verifying facts. In noting that reaction we pass from the substance or contents of scholarship to its bearing or message; and here the first pair of diagnostic traits is *Theory* and *Method*. Theory has been assigned to another member of this panel as a main topic, so it needs no exhaustive discussion now. It is enough to point out the two forms that it may take. One is the theory of a whole subject, such as the theory of history, or of society; the theory of literature or of any other art, the theory of language or of any discipline. In this form, theory uses accepted facts and events to erect a universal explanation of kindred facts and

events. It tries to answer such questions as “How is history possible?” or “What makes a piece of writing literature?” The many schools of criticism that flourish today and monopolize student and teaching time are theory in this sense. Besides explanation, it often aims at changing radically the common-sense view of the subject, and in that sense it is a creed.

But theory can also be applied, and if so it becomes a method. The scholar’s performance then consists in going over well-known data – those of history and social affairs, of literature, philosophy, and the arts – and by the use of the new theoretical criteria changing the significance of the facts. In a word, it is revisionism. Often the criteria come from what is called interdisciplinary work. Thus the use of myth, symbol, and theme in diagnosing literature is derived from anthropology, linguistics, and psychology.

The main impetus of this revisionism is the desire to unmask hidden features and secret causes; its value is often judged by the degree to which the results obtained go not only against received opinion but against plausibility. Since revisionism often looks like paradox, so paradox comes to pass for revision, as when an article maintained that the spread of railroads had nothing to do with the economic development of this country. In performing such feats, revisionism shelters under the lee of science, which has accustomed us to distrust common sense systematically and eagerly accept the incredible.

Theory in both its forms has also modified the sound of scholarship – I mean its prose and our response to it. The old dry-as-dust scholarship was dull because it reported its findings in unvaried declarative sentences, grouped only in a mechanical order. If the reader survived, he had at least gained a body of evidence that he might sort out for importance and organize more suitably. Under theory, especially apropos of literature, the matter is dull in a new way, which is difficult to describe: the sentences do not declare tangibles but relentlessly dictate attitudes – subtle, tangled, often obscure. With these characteristics, they are also evanescent; the reader loses his footing, because the scholar does not amplify, oppose, or replace any clear position: he weaves arabesques.

To illustrate, an actual example is called for. Here is a passage from a thoughtful study of Henry James’s unfinished novel, *The Sense of the Past*. “He [the hero] becomes finely aware to become aware of life. His consciousness grows larger than life, or than death, to show that life itself is large and cannot be detached in the reclusive self, framed in the indefectibility of the portrait which

no longer attests to life, hung up in the closed consciousness.” Try remembering the upshot of twenty-five pages in this diacritical vein.

On close reading, it is found that one reason for the lack of sharpness is the use of unanchored abstraction – abstraction without indicated limits and shy of particularizing – no events or persons. One could argue that this kind of writing is called for by the subjects themselves, which tend to be indefinite. To use a made-up example, “Dream, Destiny, and Death in the Later Poems of Emily Bronte” does not strike the analytic mind as a subject with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Apart from quoting lines, it imposes no obligations, but rather opens the gate to boundless speculation and arbitrary choice.

The same liberty is provided by a much-favored type of subject in history so-called: (again a made-up example) “The Victorian Governess in Families of the Newly Rich: 1840–1887” (Why ’87? “It was the Queen’s jubilee.”) After reading such studies one is moved to the comment that is inspired by a certain kind of modern art – “Interesting!” The sense of knowledge acquired is absent.

To be sure, not all studies governed by theory present these characters. A sizable number offer very definite conclusions and deserve to be classed separately. Their mark is: *Ideology* and the *Cult of the New*. Let us define Ideology as a special set of absolute terms and relations with which to comprehend the world. The scholar who adopts an ideology is a theorist whose broad conclusions are predetermined and whose original findings are fresh illustrations of those conclusions. In the background is a mastermind whose works supply the terms and the rules on which the inquiry proceeds – Marx, Freud, Levi-Strauss have been the most prominent of such lawgivers, but others – Kierkegaard, Jung, Hayek, Talcott Parsons – have also been taken by modern scholars as directors of mind and conscience.

The influence of Ideology should not be confused with that of bias, although Ideology includes what in recent scholarship has been termed politicization; it might in fact be urged that scholars have always shown prejudice and predispositions; the neutral mind does not exist. That is true, but the unconscious pressure of temperament which is called bias differs from the conscious effect of a ready-made system of ideas. For one thing, bias has no special vocabulary to impose and is to that extent neutral. For another, it can be held in check by the true scholar, whereas on the contrary the ideologue wants to promote his bias, which he or she sees as the plain truth of things. In the nineteenth century, the political biases formed a kind of graduated scale and only the doctrinaire

Catholics bore the stamp of ideology. Today, ideologue scholarship would suffice by itself to show that we live in an age of religious wars.

Among the biases characteristic of our time, the cult of the new accounts for the fashions that sweep over the scholarly world. A topic, an idea, a figure suddenly grows all-important. Dissertation writers are corralled in droves to study some aspect of the new subject, while their mentors seek the bubble reputation, not at the cannon's mouth, but at the hands of the conference organizer or the journal editor, who has himself just revised his priorities. The new enthusiasm – or is it but a timely rescue from boredom? – is given the name of “relevance,” and loses it automatically when the next fashion arises. Which is not to say that the former fashion disappears. East Asia, black studies, American studies, women's studies, slavery, the frontier, Henry James, Herman Melville are still with us, but they are not the vanguard subjects they once were.

The similarity between these waves of topicality and what happens in the natural sciences brings us to the last pair of characteristics: *Quantification* and *Reductivism*. The desire to emulate science is visible in the urge to theorize and specialize; it is conspicuous in so-called quantification, which is often misnamed measurement. In scholarship, quantification is only counting; measurement implies a truly homogeneous substance, which can be divided into identical portions by means of a standard unit devised for the purpose. In quantified scholarship, the homogeneous substance is seldom more than a verbal abstraction. When, for example, “violence” preceding a revolution is quantified, or the “education” of the Tudor nobility, or “religion” in our own time, the material is not there to be handled; it is assumed to exist as a separate entity and then pseudo-measured by means of “indicators” – in the given examples: police reports, university matriculation, church attendance. In some of the humanities, this species of counting has been used in reverse, to define the nature of the supposed substance. Thus in music, certain common formulas are assigned the role of indicator to arrive at an exact notion of “musical style.” Here the assumption is that the technical devices used by many or most musicians have the same quality and fulfill the same purpose in all compositions.

Equally in sociology, in music, and elsewhere, two new resources have encouraged such scholarly efforts. One is the computer, which bears the burden of an otherwise intolerable drudgery. The other is the opening up or revaluing of hitherto unused collections of fact. These range from courthouse records to the mistakes of Shakespeare's typesetters. The principle at work is that a large

number of small items, insignificant in themselves, can when added up yield important truths.

It is clear that this miniaturizing of the scholar's material goes with his desire to reach the broadest possible generalization. Such a concern is in keeping not only with the mode of science but also with the spirit of democracy. The individual figure or event matters little in comparison with the anonymous mass and trend. And since the massive or anonymous is necessarily abstract, quantified scholarship also satisfies the interest in theory – often a particular theory, Marx's, Freud's, or whoever's.

Thus the work of Fernand Braudel has been acclaimed for a double merit – its reliance on numbers and its support of the Marxian view of society. The recent objection that Braudel's method distorts the past by leaving out whole ranges of fact, like the earlier critique that, on his own admission, his calculations are uncertain and change nothing in our previous knowledge from literary sources, hardly touches the case: in an age not of science, but of cultural scientism, the rhetoric of numbers is all powerful.

Given these various intermingled characteristics (whether or not the nomenclature used here is the best that could be found), is it possible to draw up a list of their advantages for scholarship as such? No doubt. But first, it is necessary to repeat the opening caveat that scholarship includes work that escapes or goes against these distinctive tendencies. So any balance sheet should confine itself to listing those assets that can serve the purposes of all scholarship, that are assimilable by others than the practitioners of a particular method or cult. The liabilities need no enumeration, except for the overriding one of keeping the educated reader at arm's length. Anything that causes scholarly work to be unintelligible, trivial, or repellent, by definition works against the ideal of increasing and disseminating knowledge; why publish?

It appears to be true that public interest in scholarship has not kept pace with the vast increase in scholarly production. But it is also true that the great output has made the public aware of many new subjects of high interest. And the writers who have reached that public could hardly have done their work without the extensive organization of libraries and other sources. So *Volume* and *System* have justified themselves, and not only through the statistical law of the more the merrier.

From Inflation and Repetition, the only likely benefit is that repetition has the power of instructing. As General Grant said of his early schooling, “I was told so often that a noun is the name of a thing that I began to believe it.”

Theory is more difficult to assess. What has it fostered besides argument and confusion? Well, it has satisfied the interest of this age in analysis, in knowing what we are doing and why; or to put it differently, it has appeased our devouring self-consciousness, and it may thereby lead to a future serenity that will be truly creative. Meanwhile, its consort Abstraction, which so quickly befogs the best intellect, has given endless exercise to ingenuity.

Ideology incurs the same reproach without compensating side effects, unless the fortunate battling of several strong ideologies within the scholarly kingdom helps to demonstrate the inadequacy of each. Some observers might add that every ideology tends to draw attention to subjects and materials that would otherwise be overlooked; it serves as a sort of advertising medium for – let us say – economics, psychology, or anthropology as neglected components of other disciplines. This would be a net gain, if it were not for the fact that ideologies do not precede but follow the scholar-thinker’s discovery of new subjects and their interrelations.

As for Quantification and its reductivism, it serves the same ends as abstraction, turning the individual and the concrete into undifferentiated substance and numerical tulle. Conceivably, it could throw light on social action, like any reliable statistics. But to scholarship its contribution has been the exploitation of new types of evidence and at the very least the attempt to conduct research in the wholesale rather than retail manner. Some would add that the attempt has been useful by demonstrating the difficulty and uncertainty of founding knowledge on bulk rather than quality.

One question remains: How far may the characteristics of modern scholarship be ascribed to the feeling that the supply of traditional subjects has been exhausted? In other cultural manifestations – notably philosophy and the arts – that feeling of exhaustion has certainly caused similar results, such as impatience with common sense, recourse to abstraction and theory, and the use of indirect methods, all these being devices for renewal and shields from the obvious. So much sophistication tells us that we live in the Alexandrian period of civilization and that we must expect busyness rather than energy, and ingenuity in place of genius. Modern scholarship, in short, appropriately reflects its own time.