IMPOSTORS in the TEMPLE

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subtle and powerful, that has been adapted by today’s academic intellectuals to make selfish and unethical use of hapless graduate students. While Ph.D. students are used as teaching assistants, while they do boring and repetitious research work for their professor-mentors, they are not progressing toward either mastering their chosen field of study or producing a piece of original research of their own.

Pauline Maier, a professor of history at M.I.T., observes that there is an “enormous power teachers have over students.” And that “power can be used for good, to release energies and develop talents, or for evil, causing (even inadvertently) an unwarranted and crippling sense of failure and incapacity.”

All of us have heard Lord Acton’s famous maxim, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” so often that we probably no longer pay any attention to it. But there is a lot of wisdom in what Lord Acton wrote to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887. Academic intellectuals are no more immune to the seduction of power than anyone else.

Today there is a ritual abuse of Ph.D. students. What they need most is time to pursue their advanced course work, time to master their field of study, time to learn how to conduct original research, to write, and to finish a dissertation. Instead, the professors rob them of that time, demanding that students free them from much of their teaching and research responsibilities. The professors exploit their graduate students with great skill, concocting a long teaching and research gauntlet that must be run by anyone who wants a Ph.D.

Studying for an advanced degree should be an exhilarating time, but for many it is a debilitating one. Because of the effective requirement of doing someone else’s teaching and someone else’s research, it now takes an excruciatingly long time to earn the Ph.D. degree, an unconscionably large chunk out of one’s life. In 1988 the median number of years it took to get a Ph.D. after graduating from college was 10.5. Even if you just count the median number of years the students were actually enrolled in graduate school it is a very long time: 6.9 years.

In the social sciences (anthropology, economics, political science, sociology, et al.) the median number of years spent in graduate school is 7.4. For the humanities (history, classics, philosophy, religion, et al.) the median time stretches out even further—8.5 years in graduate school, and 12.2 years total time to the degree.

If we break down these numbers by sex and race, the results are even more disturbing. While the median number of years it takes to get a Ph.D. is 10.5, men manage to do it in 9.7 years. But women take 12.3 years, 27 percent longer than men. And African-Americans take 14.9 years—more than 50 percent longer.

Of note here is the growing controversy in the academic intellectual world over the noticeable lack of black professors, in spite of some twenty years of affirmative action programs by the universities. As we enter the last decade of the twentieth century, only 2.6 percent of university faculty are African-American. Almost all members of the faculty are white—90.5 percent—while 2.9 percent are Hispanic, 3.3 percent Asian, and 0.7 percent are American Indian. When challenged on the glaring discrepancy, the professors usually defend their white enclave by pointing out there are relatively few African-Americans earning doctoral degrees, at least not enough to provide the numbers they profess to want. It might help to reduce the “shortage” a great deal if it did not take fifteen years for an African-American college graduate to earn a Ph.D. degree.

There is no good reason why a Ph.D. should take more than three, or at most four, years of work beyond the bachelor’s degree. Experts have agreed on this for years, ever since the Ph.D. was created just before the Civil War. Yale University awarded the first three American Ph.D. degrees in 1861. The requirements at the beginning were: (1) two years of course work past the bachelor’s degree, (2) a comprehensive final examination, and (3) a written dissertation. The quality of the thought in the dissertation, not its length, was what counted. One of the first three men to receive the Ph.D. in America was James Morris Whitton, and his Yale dissertation was “a six-page handwritten thesis in Latin on the proverb Brevis vita, ars longa” (Life is brief, the arts endure)."
For most of the next one hundred years there was agreement on just how long it should take to earn a Ph.D. In 1990, in an article brilliantly critical of the American Ph.D. system, Theodore Ziołkowski, a professor at Princeton University and dean of the graduate school, traced the stability of the Ph.D. system since its inception:

The American conception of the Ph.D. has remained remarkably constant throughout most of the century. In 1964, the Association of Graduate Schools and the Council of Graduate Schools issued a joint statement summarizing their view of the normal course of study leading to the doctorate: a year or two of lectures and seminars followed by a general examination and a dissertation. The entire course of study should normally involve no more than three or, at most, four years beyond the baccalaureate. The four-year norm has been affirmed by most writers who have analyzed the situation.  

The gap between what should be and what is exacts a fearsome price. When young men and women are forced to spend not three or four years, but ten, twelve, or even fifteen years to earn the Ph.D., the entire process becomes corrupting. Those extra years are critical ones that are ripped out of the productive life of the young scholars. At a time when they should already have the degree and be teaching at a university, earning substantial amounts of money and enjoying the prestige and satisfaction of being independent, they are, instead, struggling students. As the years roll by and they grind on in their studies and research and writing, they must by necessity hold part-time and temporary jobs. They marry, they have children, they grow old—and yet they are still students.

The average graduate student is thirty-four years old before he or she breaks free of the cocoon of dependency that is the Ph.D. process. Thirty-four years old before they get to be practicing adults. Others their age have a ten-year jump on them. Psychologically, some remain students for life, never quite getting used to the idea of making decisions on their own. You might say they remain in a state of arrested social development. And, of course, these are the relatively lucky ones. Some take many more years to earn the degree. The average African-American is almost thirty-nine years old when he or she receives the Ph.D. They give up fifteen years or more to get that coveted piece of paper. Fifteen years of career advancement, fifteen years of increasing income. Fifteen years of being an independent adult.

There is an unseen cost to this exploitation of graduate students. What we see are 33,000 middle-aged men and women gogglingly grasping the Ph.D. degree every year. What we don’t see are the tens of thousands of brilliant minds who would not tolerate the abuse, the students who would not submit to the humiliation and exploitation. Tragically, this probably includes many of the best minds in America. For it is these strong souls who would have been much more likely to advance the thresholds of knowledge, more likely than the ones who followed the rules and meekly surrendered so many years of their lives.

In 1992 Neil Rudenstine, president of Harvard, and William Bowen, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, published a major new study of doctorate education in America, In Pursuit of the Ph.D. Perhaps the most startling finding of this work is that fewer than half of all students who enter Ph.D. programs ever get the degree—more than half drop out along the way. They don’t drop out casually, but more likely “after pursuing degrees for anywhere from six to twelve years.”

This terrible waste and abuse of some of America’s finest talents has been going on silently, virtually unnoticed, for decades. Perhaps why so little has been written about it can be explained by what a clinical psychologist, Dr. Frederick Stern, told Bowen and Rudenstine in the course of their study. Having done his own doctoral dissertation on the effect psychological factors have on the length of time it takes students to complete a dissertation, Stern suggested that “the traumas associated with pursuit of the Ph.D. may even have discouraged many scholars from returning to such a personally painful subject [italics added].”

If this all sounds farfetched, try something. The next time you get the opportunity to talk to someone who has run the Ph.D. gauntlet, or even better, someone who started but dropped out, ask
him about his experience. Did he find it fair, challenging? Did he think he was treated well, with respect? There is no better way to understand what is involved than to listen to the pain and anguish of one who has experienced it.

But it shouldn't be this way, and it doesn't have to be this way. In fact, the things that would fix it are simple.

First, we have to stop this business of students teaching students. Not only is it disastrous for the younger students who are taught, it is also disastrous for those who teach. The time a graduate student spends in teaching is of very limited benefit. It may puff the egos of some students who enjoy the temporary power and position, and it will give them some hard-won experience they can use if they ever go on to become professors. But the cost they pay is too high.

Second, we have to stop this business of professors using students to conduct their research. We don't have to get rid of all research jobs, some of which are proper and needed, but we do need to stop the practice of students doing research for the professors who supervise their doctoral programs. The conflict of interest is self-evident. There is too much pressure to put the professor's interests before the interests of the student.

Third, we should do everything we can to shorten the time needed to get the degree and to free up the student's time to focus on his own work as much as possible. Universities should increase the paltry amount of financial support they now give in fellowships and grants.

University should also expand the loan programs. One widespread myth is that Ph.D.s are saddled with large debts when they graduate. Not true. In 1988, over half (53 percent) of the Ph.D. graduates had no debt whatsoever related to the ten-plus years of their education. Another 17 percent owed less than $5,000; only 13 percent owed more than $20,000. And no wonder, since most of them were forced to teach and do research instead of being allowed to borrow money to pay for the cost of their graduate education.

Fourth, the apprenticeship system, with a single professor as mentor, should be dismantled. Students should be evaluated by review boards composed of many professors and by more standardized examinations, all designed to remove the student from the clutches of any one professor. When power is dispersed, it tends to be more benign.

Fifth, the dissertation should be treated realistically for what it is, a demonstration of the student's ability to conduct rigorous research. It is time to drop the pretense that Ph.D. theses must constitute an important, original contribution to knowledge. Very few Ph.D. theses can meet this test. Very few ever have. Almost none of the tens of thousands of theses completed each year are published, and even fewer are ever cited as important contributions to knowledge. There is nothing wrong with this, because this is what one would expect from beginning scholars.

Something is wrong with pretending that everyone should, and that almost everyone does, make an important contribution with his or her first major piece of research. That is the first step down the slippery slope of intellectual deceit, a fallacy that eats away at intellectual integrity. It is a curious concept, but the idea of making an original, significant contribution to knowledge as something one must do to become a professor is branded in the mind of every Ph.D. candidate. Few of them ever forget it. Most of them never achieve it.

The ability to do original, important research has nothing whatsoever to do with superior teaching. Yes, a new discovery or two can add immeasurably to the classroom experience—but the truly new is truly rare. What is critically important to superior teaching is a mastery of the field. It helps a lot if the teacher knows what he or she is talking about. It does not help a lot if the teacher has demonstrated the ability to conduct research. As Andrew Hacker, a professor of political science at Queens College in New York City, commented in 1990, “I have never seen why a Ph.D. should be a requisite for college-level teaching. Indeed, very few professors continue with serious research after they get their doctorates.”

Indeed, it is a question that has been posed many times over the years, but perhaps never more cogently than by William James, in his classic 1903 essay “The Ph.D. Octopus.” In 1903 America
produced just 337 Ph.D.s, one percent of the number we produce today. But James, based on his experience as a Harvard professor, 
deftly seized on the live nerve that still jangles when touched in the 
graduate schools of America. “Is not our growing tendency to ap-
point no instructors who are not also doctors an instance of pure 
sham?” he asked. “Will any one pretend for a moment that the 
doctor’s degree is a guarantee that its possessor will be successful as 
a teacher?” James’s telling question was ignored then, just as it is 
ignored today.

What we need to do is award the Ph.D. degree in two models— 
one with the written dissertation and one without. Sort of like the 
President’s Medal of Freedom, the most prestigious award that can 
be given to an American. The Medal of Freedom comes in two 
varieties—the regular one and one “with distinction.” Almost no 
one knows the difference, because they are both extraordinary hon-
ors.

The basic Ph.D. degree should be awarded for mastery of a 
field of study, after passing written and oral examinations to dem-
onstrate that mastery. It should not take longer than three years of 
intense study. Possession of this degree should qualify one to be a 
college teacher.

The second type of Ph.D. degree would be reserved for those 
students who had demonstrated the ability to research and write. 
If, and only if, the student elected to write a thesis and the thesis 
was accepted as a clear demonstration of the student’s ability to 
conduct serious research would the Ph.D. degree be granted “with 
research distinction.” Moreover, if someone who had received the 
regular Ph.D. later produced a piece of good, original research, the 
notation “with research distinction” could be added to the earlier 
degree.

These simple changes would dramatically shorten the time 
necessary to earn the Ph.D. and open up the profession of university 
teaching to tens of thousands of men and women who may not be 
researchers but who have the temperament and brilliance to be 
 superb teachers of our children.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GLASS BEAD GAME

If teaching—the raison d’être for being a professor—has fallen 
into such disrepute among academic intellectuals, then what does 
command their affection? The answer is scholarship. Today the 
most important prize in the world of academic intellectuals is a 
 scholarly reputation, recognition that one has made an important 
contribution to knowledge. The degrees and nuances of such rec-
ognition are many, but appreciation is largely confined to one’s 
peers; rarely do scholarly reputations reach such heights that the 
general public is aware of them. For most professors the surest route 
to scholarly fame (and some fortune) is to publish in the distin-
guished academic journals of their field. Not books or treatises, for 
these are rare indeed, but short, densely packed articles of a dozen 
pages or so.

The successful professor’s résumé will be littered with citations 
of short, scholarly articles, their value rising with the prestige of the 
journal. These studious articles are the coin of the realm in the 
academic world. They are the professor’s ticket to promotion, higher 
salary, generous research grants, lower teaching loads, and even 
more opulent office space.

The articles are rarely speculative essays. Mostly they represent 
the summing up of hours, months, even years of research. Often 
packed with arcane mathematical equations, they bristle with words 
most of us never use. These strange words are jargon, the special
in peer reviewing—often the career hopes of a budding young scholar—it would not be unreasonable to worry a little about corruption sneaking in.

But these questions are not explored. The fact that some fields of study are small enough so that the intellectuals involved in them are all known to each other, or that friends review friends, or that reviewers repay those who reviewed their own writings favorably in the past—all these potential problems are ignored. Peer reviewing is treated with the same respect as confession in the Catholic Church. It is held unthinkable that anyone would ever violate the canons of the craft. Well, maybe. But someday the whole practice of peer review should be opened up and studied, and the techniques of scientific analysis so prized by academic intellectuals applied rigorously to the process.

This still does not explain why the academic journals are so seldom read. Two reasons are usually given. First, it is alleged that the splendid growth of intellectual research has led to such an enormous output of important, relevant material that no one really has time to read it all anymore. And second, that many of the articles, especially those heavily laced with mathematical equations, are too difficult for most people to understand.

It is true that an astounding number of academic journals are published every year. We don’t really know how many there are because no one as yet has had the inclination or the fortitude to count them. One estimate has at least 40,000 scientific journals published worldwide, generating over 1 million articles every year. That’s 2,740 every single day. The New Republic, one of America’s leading magazines for professional intellectuals, estimated in the late 1980s that the field of sociology alone produced 2,400 scholarly articles a year in the United States.1

It is also true that no academic intellectual could possibly read everything published in his field. But that is true for almost everyone. The incredible explosion of publications everywhere has produced so much information that none of us can possibly keep up with everything. But that does not prevent us from reading a lot of what is published, especially those things we find interesting, important, and useful. Moreover, academic intellectuals are generally faster and better readers than the average person and are fully capable, both in terms of time available and intelligence, of reading forty or fifty journal articles every year. But they don’t.

The most widely accepted reason for the benign neglect of scholarly articles in prestigious academic journals is that they are too mathematical. The complicated mathematical equations used to spin out the intellectual’s speculations are thought to be beyond the comprehension of most people. And it is true that during the last thirty or forty years there has been a massive shift toward the heavy use of mathematical formulae, and away from English prose. To many people, encountering an article heavily studded with mysterious equations is equivalent to trying to read Chinese. The meaning of the article is a mystery locked behind unfamiliar symbols. In the research world of the academic intellectuals that mystery only adds to the allure. Not being able to comprehend something that is important and profound, that has been given an intellectual seal of approval by peers, only deepens the mystery and enhances its value.

Still, there is a danger in all mysteries. We cannot ever fully trust what we do not know or cannot explain. What if what is hidden beneath those thick words and intricate equations is wrong or inaccurate, or worse, trivial?

Impossible. Preposterous. Everyone “knows” that most academic research consists of important, significant contributions to knowledge. Many of us may not understand or appreciate the contribution, but no one questions the contribution. That conviction has been long held. It was an article of faith when I first entered the world of the academic intellectuals in the late 1950s. Sure, every now and then there was an article that was a clinker, an aberration, an exception to excellence. But not everyone is so complacent anymore. In fact, questions are being raised by some of the most noted intellectuals in the world.

On March 6, 1991, Donald Kennedy, president of Stanford University, sounded an alarm on the quality of scholarly research. In an address to his faculty, he called for “significant changes in
fool's gold "because its colour may deceive the novice into thinking he has found a gold nugget." It is useful mainly in making sulfur, although it does emit hot sparks when struck by steel, leading some archeologists to believe it was a primitive means of making fire. Much of the academic writing that glitters and gleams in the academic journals is intellectual pyrite, perhaps good only for making fire.

Some may say "So what?" Who cares if the scribblings of academic intellectuals are often trivial and irrelevant? There are at least two reasons for concern. One is the tragic waste of so much brainpower. Professors—even the least talented and least enthusiastic ones—generally work hard. When career advancement is at stake, the pressure to publish can be all but irresistible.

Second, and perhaps even more important, is the corrosive impact of producing trivial, irrelevant research and then pretending that it is important. Writing for publication is now the essence of what the academic intellectual does. It is the self-selected standard by which academics judge each other and themselves. When they pretend that each other's work is important when it is not, that it is relevant when it is not, that it is a significant contribution to knowledge when it is not, they violate the integrity of what they are. If a man or woman repeatedly publishes or praises work that is essentially worthless and pretends it is not, there is unavoidable damage to his or her self-esteem. Knowing that one is to some degree an intellectual fraud can create painful feelings of anxiety and guilt.

Let me make one point as clear as I can. I am not talking about all professors in our universities and colleges. Many of them are what we think they are. They are brilliant, learned men and women, they love teaching and do it well, they research and write about important, relevant things, and they do it with insight and skill. But this kind of academic intellectual appears to be dwindling in number and influence, increasingly crowded out by a distressingly large number of newcomers who share neither their temperament nor their mental powers. They are the ones who now dominate, and who deserve our scrutiny. They are the ones who have created the bizarre intellectual world of today's universities in which the highest value is trivial, irrelevant publication and the lowest value is teaching.

There are some interesting parallels between America's academic world in the 1990s and the world of Hermann Hesse's 1943 novel, The Glass Bead Game. The novel is an ironic parody of the intellectual world as Hesse saw it then, and is remarkably prophetic of our own time.

The glass bead game in Hesse's book was exactly that—a game. But it was played with such intensity that it gradually took over the professional lives of the intellectuals who played it. As they played the game with increasing skill and fervor, they retreated further and further from the concerns of the real world. In effect, the intellectuals in Hesse's Glass Bead Game created their own fantasy world that transcended reality, and as they earned respect and honor for their game skills, as being the highest possible level of intellectual achievement, they soared off into ultimate irrelevance.

In Hesse's words, the glass bead game was designed to be deliberately elite, open only to the brilliant few who worked hard and surrendered themselves to its charm:

The only way to learn the rules of this Game of games is to take the usual prescribed course, which requires many years . . .

The Game . . . was capable of expressing mathematical processes by special symbols and abbreviations. The players, mutually elaborating these processes, threw these abstract formulas at one another, displaying the sequences and possibilities of their science. This mathematical and astronomical game of formulas required great attentiveness, keenness, and concentration. Among mathematicians, even in those days, the reputation of being a good Glass Bead Game player meant a great deal.

At various times the Game was taken up and imitated by nearly all the scientific and scholarly disciplines . . . Each discipline which seized upon the Game created its own language of formulas, abbreviations, and possible combinations. Everywhere, the elite intellectual youth developed a passion for these Games, with their dialogues and progressions of formulas . . .
MARTIN ANDERSON

The Glass Bead Game, formerly the specialized entertainment of mathematicians in one era...now more and more cast its spell upon all true intellectuals. Many an old university...turned to it...the Game rapidly evolved into what it is today: the quintessence of intellectuality and art, the sublime cult.

Academic life in America today bears a chilling similarity to the fantasy Hesse created in 1943. Our academic intellectuals play an elaborate game whose markers of success are not small glass beads, but the number of articles published in academic journals and the number of times those articles are cited in other articles written by their colleagues.

In theory this makes good sense. Judging any piece of written work can be a highly subjective business, and judging objectively many different pieces of work by many different authors can be all too taxing. The idea seems to be that a count of the articles written and a count of the number of citations received is a good proxy for measuring scholarly output. After all, journal articles that are reviewed and approved for publication by one's peers should be superior work. And if one's work is cited by another academic intellectual, the clear inference is that it must have been important enough to influence his or her thinking, and thus is a contribution to knowledge.

Unfortunately, the theory of article counts and citation counts rests on the silent assumption that the articles counted are important, relevant, and contain significant, original contributions to knowledge, and that citations counted thus measure the dissemination of that knowledge. The assumption is false. Only a tiny portion of academic articles come close to meeting the multiple criteria of importance, relevance, and originality.

Sadly, a sensible idea has become corrupted. The shortcut to measuring quality and lasting impact has turned into a short-circuit of valid judgment. Though the article counts and citation counts are wildly popular among the aficionados of today's intellectual fashions, they have little validity. But if you think of them as brightly colored glass beads in a game that values glass beads, then they have great value when exchanged for promotions and salary increases and intellectual reputations in the academic world.

It is a relatively simple matter to keep count of the journal articles anyone writes. Most academics keep detailed, up-to-date lists that they attach to their résumés and can provide you with almost instantly. But citations, those references to one's published works in the writings of others, are a more elusive quarry. So much is published that it would be a monumental chore for anyone to track down all citations of his or her work. Beyond that, any attempt to assign meaning to that count, to attach importance or significance to work cited, would be even more difficult.

On the other hand, important, significant work does tend to be referred to by later writers and, in some instances, can be a true reflection of the power and scope of the work being cited. For example, in economics the works of Adam Smith and Karl Marx are still being cited many years after their deaths. The same is true of more recent economists such as Alfred Marshall, John Maynard Keynes, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman. But the logic of citation is one-way. While important, significant works are often cited, it does not follow that frequent citation necessarily means the works cited are important and significant. That simple point seems to have been lost in today's academic intellectual world.

It is tacitly assumed that a citation is the intellectual equivalent of a small glass bead that can be hoarded and tallied up, and eventually cashed in. Not unexpectedly, close attention is paid to something that valuable. In fact, there is a small industry serving the academic world that does nothing but sift through the millions of pages that roll off the academic presses each year and record, analyze, and print the results.

The preeminent citation counter is the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), with the intimidating subtitle “An International Multidisciplinary Index to the Literature of the Social, Behavioral and Related Sciences.” First published in 1973, the index is a multi-million-dollar business. The published version is sixty-five volumes, each volume containing hundreds of pages densely packed with fine print. The whole set takes up about eight feet of shelf space. And