



SHOULD I GO TO GRAD SCHOOL?

Edited by

JESSICA LOUDIS, BOŠKO BLAGOJEVIĆ,
JOHN ARTHUR PEETZ, AND ALLISON RODMAN

BLOOMSBURY

Alexander Nagel

MY ONLY EXPERIENCE OF depression was during graduate school. I don't mean I was down or drinking too much or getting up late. I mean I was unable to do anything. I would find myself at social events without the capacity to open my mouth. I experienced an entire interview for a post-doctoral fellowship from above: I was looking down on myself saying incoherent things to a jury of world-famous scholars. I cried a lot. It was my last year in graduate school and I knew it. I knew it because I had received a finishing grant, which meant I was to complete my dissertation (about the origin of the easel picture in Renaissance art, at least that was the idea) and leave the program by the end of that academic year. That was twenty years ago, yet I have never in my life felt so old as I did that year.

For five months I sat at my desk, or just lay down, and did not write a word. At some point in December, I approached my adviser to explain that things were not going well, really not going well at all. This was a miserable capitulation, as I had always been pridefully independent, only ever going to him with some good news or focused question or accomplishment in hand. His jaw hardened and he shifted around in his seat. The department has just been allocated these finishing grants from the Mellon Foundation, he said, fixing me with his cold blue eyes; successful performances during this first round will ensure that the department will retain the grant and, thus, will be in a position to offer it to students after me.

I nodded, left his office, and continued not writing, or doing much of anything. By that point it had also become completely clear that there were no prospects for teaching jobs in my field for the coming year—except, that is, for one job, in Kansas, and I would rather starve closer to home than move there. So there I was, on a terminal grant, hurtling toward unemployment.¹ Maybe not writing was my lame gesture of resistance in a wind tunnel of futility.

By mid-January, inertia was accompanied by a gentle but constant hyperventilation. Desperate, I remembered a technique my adviser had described in another context: *When your back is up against the wall, write two pages every day, no matter what. Even if you know they are terrible, write them out. I think that is how he put it: Write them out.* So I started. I was pretty much writing “la la la,” but I did it. And then I did it the next day. And the next. The thing about this technique is that the first two months are an uphill climb; the more you climb the more you tire, and then you realize the hill is also getting steeper. It is fairly easy to write two pages on any given day, but it is hard to do it day after day, harder to get to ten days, and harder than ever to get from ten to fifteen days. For one thing, you run out of things to say; also, you are now putting effort into making various two-page bits link up with one another. At thirty days, you are in the fog of war, exhausted, dirty, wounded, not sure which way is forward. Some days I would writhe all day, come up with nothing, then see that it was eleven P.M. and in a dry-mouthed panic scabble out the two required pages before midnight. With minor projects like a seminar paper, you are turning a fairly small crank; there are some weeks of chaos and then you see more or less how you are going to write twenty pages, bad or good, on the subject. I had never turned a crank this big before, and most of the time it felt like there was no way to make it move.

After about two months, however, I had more than one hundred pages lying on my desk—a pile of crap, but it was editable crap. It was a *draft*. On a sunny day, one might even call it half a dissertation. Now, on some days,

¹ Do not listen to those people who say that job prospects for academics in the humanities have been consistently dwindling. They have not. They are certainly better now than when I was in grad school.

the slog to two pages would result miraculously in five. The crank was getting to where it could be pulled back around. It was like work on a puzzle, which speeds up when the missing parts start to look like holes.

“He never had an unpublished thought.” I remember hearing this said about a prominent professor whose unstoppable output demanded a decisive response from the graduate student shark pool. To a student about to embark on a teaching career, I will say, somewhat more sympathetically, “There are times when what you say will be exactly coextensive with what you know of the subject.” It is also true, sadly but not surprisingly, that such coextensive presentations usually please the audience much more than your disquisitions on a subject you know well.

But the point of being an academic, rather than a journalist, is not to write that way. We get to look into a subject from various angles before writing something about it. We get to hold things in reserve. Only about 10 percent of the reading, archival digging, and note taking I had done in the years of “dissertation research” made it into the dissertation. Which is not to say that it was useless, or not relevant. It was there, the way the paper is there in a drawing. Graduate school is a very good place to build up reserves. You can tell when you’re talking to someone who has reserves.

I didn’t think too much about going to graduate school. Like many undergraduates doing liberal arts degrees, I was generally artistic and literary, and I had also been politically involved. I had been a history major, mostly because I thought it was a good basis for anything I might do in the future. I had already decided, after some working and wondering, that I was not an artist, and certainly not a writer of the sort who made things up. Beyond that, I wasn’t sure what I was. I liked books and art and I felt I wasn’t done devoting lots of time to them. You can do that outside of academia, of course, but I did believe that advanced ideas get worked out in structured dialogue.

I had a friend, Josephine, who was a lot like me, inordinately devoted to art even though she didn’t make it herself. When I told her I was going to

go to grad school to study art history, she responded like someone trying to dissuade a naïve youth from enlisting in the army: “But Alex, you know what they’re going to do to you, right?” I knew she meant that they were going to discipline me, make me memorize vast quantities of things, and generally turn my vibrant, dewy, poetic self into a dried-up writer of footnotes.

We didn’t stay in touch, but what Josephine said worried me in a lasting way. I went into grad school determined not to dry up. I would engage in bibliomancy, flouting scholarly method. I kept a hand in contemporary art, and I kept reading my French surrealist poets. Whenever I did something poetic and irresponsible, I would think, “In honor of Josephine!” But the fact is, she was right: Graduate school did eventually catch up with me. By the end of the dissertation, I was narrowed, stiffened, older than my years. Luckily, I was able to finish before this condition became irreversible, and I eventually regained some of the springiness of my younger years.²

These were real challenges. I certainly wasn’t worried about the other kind of concerns, how this was possibly going to help me make a living, or on a more general level, whether it is really worthwhile to devote oneself to thinking if it is not going to have a palpable application in the world. Mind you, my response was never to say, “But there are good opportunities in the field!” or “But my ideas can change the world!” It was just clear to me that getting a PhD was going to be very interesting and challenging in a real way, and getting a job probably would not be.

Undergraduates are different from grad students primarily because most of them are not there by choice. Undergrads are nervous, increasingly nervous in the era of performance-oriented parenting, but one thing they generally do not worry about is whether they should be in school. Grad students in the humanities, by contrast, get up every day, look in the mirror, and think,

2 Very important! If you stay in graduate school too long, it marks you as a person. It is a corridor where you are half living in the present-day world and half in your world of study. That is a wonderful thing, but it should not be allowed to last beyond two years for a master’s, seven years for a master’s and PhD.

“Why am I here?” “Was this really a good idea?” “I really feel like I’m falling behind my professional friends.” “I’ve been in school since the age of four and I’m fucking sick of it.” “Clearly I am not as smart and driven as X; I should just get out now.” The exceptions to this rule are the few who know that there is nothing else they would ever want to do and the ones who return to school after some exposure to the depredations of the real world.

Above all, grad students of the past five to ten years seem to want grad school to be professional school, even in the humanities. In art history, most are headed toward museum jobs and various branches of the contemporary art world and the publications that surround it, i.e., a world of commerce. They are not headed into academia, which is seen as a machine designed to deliver perfectly intelligent people into poverty, depression, and oblivion. Increasingly, I find that students want to be professionals even while they’re in school. They want a contractual understanding of what is expected of them. They want to do a good job. They want a transcript with no strange looking marks on it and a CV with lots of nonacademic professional experience on it. Above all, they want to not be wrong.

Now my students are some of the best there are, so I don’t often get bad papers. What I do get, increasingly, are efficient, intelligent, neat papers that have a reasonable point to make, and make it effectively. The reader is taken from point A to point B along a frictionless path. But only rarely do I read a paper and think, “This is a mind that has been on an adventure.” Rarely do I feel that the writer has made contact with real complexity, has felt the panic that it induces, has seen that it is beautiful and terrifying and that it cannot possibly be dealt with in twenty pages, or in a few weeks. (Those that do give some sense of having understood the unmanageable complexities of the topic at hand, and then spend twenty pages saying something really smart about it.) It is getting harder and harder to convince students that contending with exceptions, contradictions, and other wrinkles strengthens rather than weakens an argument. In sum, I am not seeing enough blood on the ground. I believe that the internships students do during their studies—purportedly to enhance their employability after grad school—are deeply affecting the way they undertake their academic work.

*

Before graduate school, you were following orders and doing your homework. After graduate school, there will be no end of deadlines to meet, grants to apply for, and packages to put together and sell. During graduate school, even if it is only for the two years of a master's program, you have an opportunity to do something different. Everyone else in the world is being asked to produce, to make things viable, which is to say, sellable. We are the ones—virtually the only ones left—who get to follow the contours of a problem all the way around, just because it is an interesting and important problem. We are the ones who get to look at the systems everyone else is caught up in and try to come to some understanding of them. We don't only get to do it, we have to do it, because practically no one else even sees that it needs to be done. When you realize this, you will stop worrying. You will join team grad school, and you will do everything you can to avoid internships, practical employment, and any thought of “applicability” the whole time you're there.