

# Monstrous knowledge: Doing PhDs in the new humanities

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## Introduction

There has been a revolution that has affected almost every academic field of studies in what used to be called the 'humanities' and 'social sciences'. Arguably its effects have been felt even in the 'hard' sciences as well. Without for the moment getting hung up by definitions, I will call this revolution the 'postmodern turn' (Hodge, 1995). In discipline after discipline, it raises issues of epistemology and the processes of intellectual and textual production, in a way that is cumulatively so radical that the previous practices of disciplinary knowledge can no longer be assumed as given by those aspiring to profess them at any level. This has important consequences for the set of practices that cluster around the PhD, as the gateway to the highest level of accreditation that is applied to actual or prospective University teachers.

I want to ask two distinct but overlapping questions. What could or should doctoral theses be like in a period of intellectual crisis, instability, contestation or revolution? And more specifically, what might a doctoral thesis be like in the 'New' or 'Postmodern' Humanities? I ask these questions as matters of some urgency, because some theses currently being written or examined run the risk of being judged by completely inappropriate criteria: as failing to be good 'Old Humanities' theses, when they should be looked at to see if they are good 'New Humanities' works.

I have supervised or examined a range of theses in recent years which fall problematically into the initially vague category of 'New Humanities', for one or more reasons which are always fundamental to their reason for existence, yet cause difficulties in the light of many current rules and practices governing doctorates. That is, the more 'excellent' such theses appear to me to be, the more they risk rejection in terms of the criteria that have previously been applied. Typically (from the point of view of these criteria) they are over-ambitious, they lack unity, they lack objectivity, they are 'creative', they are difficult to assign to a single disciplinary pigeon-hole, they are excessively concerned with their own conditions of production, and they are strenuously, complexly written (or, sometimes, refuse to be merely written, but reach out for some other mode of presentation). It is clear that this is a serious situation for any practice of judgement, especially one that carries such heavy consequences as the validation or not of a person as a 'doctor', *doctus*—one who has been taught up to the highest level for which standards are in force, and is now authorised to teach.

## PhDs and the system of disciplinarity

The PhD is the highest degree in the linear system of qualifications through which students progress in the education system in Australia, as in other Western countries. As such it forms a boundary to that system. Beyond it, there are some other qualifications such as the DLitt, but those are outside any idea of a 'normal' progression. The PhD has the awesome responsibility to make a final, irrevocable assessment of a person's relation to the dominant system of knowledge, and at this point the only judgement it is able to make is a simple 'yes' or 'no'. A doctorate is not classed. It may have to be revised or rewritten, and examiners may be more or less unanimous or enthusiastic about it, but all that disappears into a matter of the presence or absence of the three letters, 'PhD'.

The single term applies to theses in all disciplines, including sciences as well as social sciences and humanities, proclaiming an abstract unity of all knowledge, 'sophia', which seemingly is loved equally in different ways by all people who receive their doctorate. Until recently in the Australian University system, that unity was carefully parcelled out into various 'disciplines', so that people graduated with a PhD 'in' Sociology, History, etc., relatively autonomous fields or provinces in a single, hierarchically organized system of knowledges. This is the system of what can be called disciplinary doctorates.

The central characteristic of the 'New Humanities' is that it refuses this system of disciplinarity. It deconstructs its taken-for-grantedness, the unquestioned sense that the boundaries around the existing disciplines are inherent features of knowledge. It also inspects the disciplinary processes themselves, to see the work that they do in constructing and forming human subjects, and constructing also the objects of knowledge that define their institutional existence as authorised knowers.

Disciplines from this point of view are institutions of discourse in Foucault's terms. He described disciplines as "a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules" (Foucault, 1976, p 224). Disciplines in this sense are defined by objects, methods, theories and propositions, tools and techniques, which are restrictive in some respects but also endlessly productive. "For a discipline to exist, there must be the possibility of formulating—and doing so *ad infinitum*—fresh propositions" (Foucault, 1976, p. 223). They also give as well as withhold power, by controlling who may and may not speak on a topic, what must or must not be said, and how a topic must be spoken of for knowledge about it to count.

PhDs were the final moment in academia's construction of authorised speakers, 'experts', 'authorities', with a power, however, that was given to these individuals by the unitary system of knowledge, organized by disciplines. At stake is discursive power: from the point of view of aspiring PhD candidates, their prospective access to this privileged speaking position; but from the point of view of the system, the danger of admitting the anarchy of multiple and uncoordinated voices into a system that is ultimately monologic.

We can see this duality at work in the different constructions of what a PhD is from these two points of view. It is difficult to demonstrate how the disciplinary PhD is seen by students who are approaching or undertaking their doctoral studies, partly because these views are often unspeakable, with no proper form or forum in which they can be articulated. The 'idea of a PhD' has an independent existence in the minds of these students, owing more to paranoia than to Plato, outside all regulations, an image of an impossible standard of scholarly rigour, circulating amongst graduates and intensified by the alienating conditions under which doctorates in the humanities are mostly produced. Oppressively central to this idea of the doctorate is some notion of 'originality', seen as an obligation to change the whole field of knowledge in some undefined way, which is always at risk of being overtaken by some other work, perhaps as yet unpublished, or even worse, known to everyone else other than the candidate, a fact which will be pointed out by a cold, supercilious and omniscient examiner as the reason why all that the candidate had thought and written over the

previous three or four or probably more years has suddenly been rendered without value.

The idealism and paranoiac excess in this idea of a PhD is not supported by regulations for PhDs in Australian Universities, as published in their handbooks. Instead they all stress formal matters such as entry requirements, the correct form of presentation of theses, and the examination process. They all specifically mention that the thesis must be a *supervised* piece of research. They are much more guarded in their claims for what the thesis must be in terms of the contentious concept of 'originality'.

The regulations of Sydney University, as befits one of the most prestigious of the 'sandstone' Universities, convey most explicitly the sense of what a PhD is really all about from this point of view:

*It is the policy of the Academic Board that a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy carry out all phases of the work completely under the control of the University at places determined by the University in the interests of the successful fulfilment of the aim of giving the candidate training in research* (1991, p. 460).

Other university regulations insist on the fact that this degree must be supervised. It is not fully independent work, but the final stage in the formation of an independent researcher. The University of Sydney is more explicit than most in insisting that the process must be "completely under the control of the University", a submission to a discipline that is located in place (and also in time—unlike undergraduates, the University of Sydney doctoral student must work continuously over semester breaks, with only four weeks leave allowed each year.)

The University of Sydney describes the qualities to be found in the thesis as follows:

*On completing the course of advanced study and research, a candidate shall present a thesis embodying the results of the work undertaken, which shall be a substantially original contribution to the subject* (1991, p. 360).

The two terms, 'advanced study' and 'research', are nearly ubiquitous in these regulations, normally in tandem as here. The generic term 'study' connects the practices firmly backwards (so that the PhD is familiarly what was done before, at Honours and undergraduate levels, but is now 'advanced', higher in some unspecified way). It is then 'research' which comes in to define what is the distinctive or categorial difference that marks off the PhD from earlier levels of study.

'Research' is the defining term for the core activity of doctoral work. The word comes via the French 'rechercher' from the latin 're-circare'—to circle around repeatedly. It still retains a sense of painstaking effortful work which covers ground rather than going unerringly to the heart of any matter. It is often followed by a preposition—'research in or into or on' a field or topic—as though it is not meant to get too directly to any goal or any discovery. We can say we 'seek' truths or 'discover' facts, but we don't say that we 'research' truth or facts. 'Research' is a meticulously peripheral activity, a process whose value is independent from the value of what it produces.

Given the key role of the concept of 'research' in the definition of PhDs, it is unsurprising to find that the requirements for 'originality' are relatively weak. In the Sydney University regulations, there is the ambiguous qualifier "substantially original contribution to the subject". Some regulations (eg Bond University) refer only to "significant contributions". Macquarie University expands on what it means by 'originality':

*The thesis must form a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject, and afford evidence of originality shown either by the discovery of new facts or by the exercise of independent critical power* (1994, p 344).

Even this formulation shows what is at issue: the *demonstration* (evidence) of a capacity in a candidate, rather than a value to be found in what is 'discovered'.

All this is consistent with a role for the PhD as primarily a process for producing a kind of human subject, a mind that is 'doctus' (docile—the words are etymologically related), safe enough to be allowed to

be let loose on the dangerous not-so-young who study at University levels. It is the culmination of the disciplinary process that underpins disciplinary knowledge. Throughout the candidature the student has been carefully 'supervised', to use the word that is found in all the regulations (not encouraged, enabled, challenged, respected), and is at last allowed to wander around ('research') in the forest of knowledge unsupervised. He or she has been 'doctored', to use a pun that I have heard many students repeat with a wry laugh about their graduation ceremonies.

We can see from this why 'originality' is so equivocal a defining term in these regulations. Sometimes it seems only to require the candidate to use first-hand sources, not to have particularly original ideas, certainly not ones that break new ground or threaten in any way the existing edifice of knowledge, and especially not the primacy of the division into provinces and 'disciplines'. The PhD in these regulations is simply the next stage in a career of study, a further qualification that allows the person to take up a position in academia. Industrious conformity is the prerequisite, with conceptual power or disciplinary innovation neither mentioned nor desired.

### Breeding monsters

I have talked above of a 'revolution' in the humanities and social sciences, uneasily aware that such terms are liable to be used with rhetorical overstatement. It has been above all the work of Thomas Kuhn (1970), the philosopher of science, who has given the term precision as well as currency to describe a characteristically decisive kind of event in the evolution of what he called paradigms in the sciences. He proposes a pattern of development whereby a 'normal' science reaches a point of 'crisis' in which its hold on a community is dissolved, to be followed by a 'revolution' in which a new paradigm competes successfully with its rivals to win the absolute victory that guarantees a new period of 'normal' science. Whether or not a 'paradigm' is the same as a discipline and includes the set of knowledges of non-scientific disciplines, I believe that the same broad pattern can be found in the evolution of the humanities and social sciences. The emergence of the 'New Humanities' is a textbook instance of a Kuhnian revolution. It is an event on the same scale as what Foucault (1970) called an "epistemic rupture", in which there is a radical change in underlying codes, principles and modalities of order across sets of disciplines.

However, there is something misleadingly unitary, conscious and purposive about the term 'revolution' as it applies to work done by lowly but ambitious PhD students, wrestling as they have to with the ambiguous value of 'originality', gambling that the trouble they are making for disciplinary knowledge will be validated by the present as well as the future. Foucault's description of the conditions of disciplinary knowledge apply closely to the situation of the 'New Humanities' doctoral student:

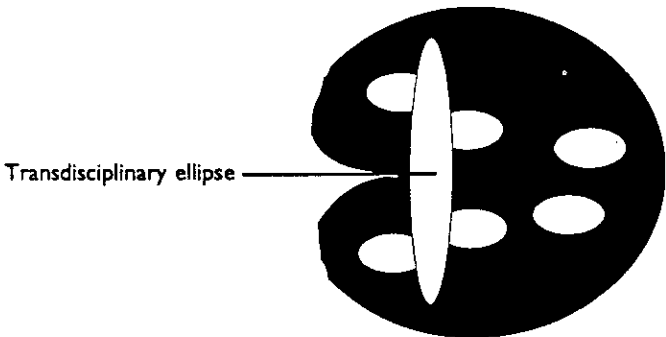
*Within its own limits, every discipline recognises true and false propositions, but it repulses a whole teratology [ie the study of monsters] of learning. The exterior of a science is both more, and less, populated than one might think: certainly there is immediate experience, imaginary themes bearing on and continually accompanying immemorial beliefs; but perhaps there are no errors in the strict sense of the term, for error can only emerge and be identified within a well-defined process; there are monsters on the prowl, however, whose forms alter with the history of knowledge. In short, a proposition must fulfil some onerous and complex conditions before it can be admitted within a discipline; before it can be pronounced true or false it must be, as Monsieur Canguilhem might say, 'within the true' (Foucault, 1976, p 224).*

We can represent the ideal image of a disciplinary organization of knowledge as a set of ellipses of light, with an intense focus at the centre, with darkness (in which monsters live and breed) all around outside the borders. In this scheme, the unexpected can in the first place be looked for in the boundaries between the disciplines. In a stable disciplinary order this will be interdisciplinarity, the precise space on the border between two disciplines. In such cases, interdisciplinarity

is a way of continuing the existing structure of knowledge, because it fills and hence reinforces the space between disciplines. In this stable state, interdisciplinarity is always provisional and opportunistic, a circumscribed raid on the darkness of extradisciplinary space in order to bring back monsters whose origins outside disciplinarity can then be forgotten.



The lozenge of disciplinarity



The folded three-dimensional space of teratogenesis

If this two-dimensional disk is subjected to pressures, much like what happens when the earth folds on itself, then the whole map of disciplinary knowledge changes. What seemed separated by dark space is superimposed, overlapping to form a stable contingent new discipline, or (in terms of the former disciplinary structure) a *transdisciplinary* formation. Transdisciplinary formations differ from interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary linkages because they are not situated on the rarefaction surrounding and buffering two fundamentally distinct disciplines, but are a new potentially explosive density near some arbitrary margin that destabilizes the basic core-plus-periphery structure of the prior disciplines.

An even more radical deformation of the previous disciplinary structure comes from the fact that, in the folding, it is not only the white space of another discipline that is incorporated into (or incorporates) the base discipline. Bits of darkness are also introjected, fraught with their fertile monsters. Transdisciplinary formations in times of stress and crisis are doubly impure, not only mingling discipline with discipline in a promiscuous mix, but also mixing disciplinarity with non-disciplinarity, with the disturbing weight of "immediate experience", "imaginary themes" and "immemorial beliefs" that are the Other, the shadow of disciplinary (privileged, expert) thought.

If PhD candidates wished to propose a thesis that was so original that it would disturb the existing assumptions of the discipline, the easiest way would be to try to incorporate precisely what those disciplinary structures attempt to exclude. The most monstrous of the denizens of this extradisciplinary outer darkness are those things that people know or believe without benefit of (in opposition to the claims to expert status of) disciplinary experts—and what experts themselves know or believe in spite of, and outside, the hard-won knowledges that have made them what they are.

If I did not fear Socrates' fate, accused of corrupting the young and condemned to death by an overdose of hemlock, I would risk offering

some practical advice (along with the further advice not to take it) on how to come up with the transformative kind of doctoral work that might be regarded as truly 'original', and what the 'New Humanities' most needs in this revolutionary phase of its development. Such as:

- *Be open to the monstrous*—take especially seriously those problems, beliefs and experiences that are annulled by ('quaint', 'naive', 'outrageous', unthinkable in terms of) a dominant discipline, whether they are intractably personal or contaminated by the disreputable demotic or popular, by passion or anger or delight, by the desire to change the world or to dream a new one.
- *Be transdisciplinary*—follow the curves of a folded disciplinary space, seeing what disciplines are necessarily super-imposed in the common space of your problematic, what the new centre of gravity is that is formed by the intrusion of this density of layered disciplinarity, what is the emergent structure of the transdisciplinary formation.
- *Detect the Shadow*—work with the old prohibitions as well as the new knowledges incorporated into the 'field of the true' and made visible by the juxtaposition of disciplines; especially the proper monster, the unspeakable, the forbidden Other of a given discipline.

Or to put it another way, I am saying that every 'original' doctoral thesis will have to interrogate the set of disciplinary imperatives that make its propositions both *necessary* and *impossible*, as the precondition for addressing that topic. That is, every candidate must take on an aspect of Foucault's (1976, p. 231) double program for discourse analysis: 'critical' discourse analysis that reverses the exclusions, displacements and rarefactions which have constituted the relevant disciplinary knowledges, and 'genealogical' discourse analysis, which recognises the operations of *chance*, *discontinuity* and *materiality* in the core of the disciplines, as in the monsters of extradisciplinary.

The work that has contributed most to the exciting and productive crises of the humanities has typically shown these qualities. Feminism brought the experience first of women and then of men within the 'field of the true', challenging and contesting the disciplinary boundaries that got in the way, slowly and cumulatively exposing the 'shadows', the ideological limitations of discipline after discipline. Anthropology brought the existence of Europeans' experience of colonised others within the field of the 'true', in a strenuously contained form that was burst open when the voices and experiences of those who had been excluded and contained gained legitimacy and force. English in its time challenged the privileged position of the classics by incorporating the pleasures of new kinds of text into 'the true', while limiting the scope of the kinds of pleasure and kinds of text that it could admit. 'Communications' and 'Cultural Studies' are more recent developments, either as bubbles within existing disciplines or as emerging fields of 'the true', chaotically overlapping with outgrowths of other disciplines often labelled 'critical' ('critical ethnography', 'critical sociology' etc.).

This is the context in which people must produce doctoral theses in 'the New Humanities': an unstable patch-work of premises and fields, an incoherent and shifting map whose present status is not agreed on, much less its future. For those who are too aware of this chaotic instability it may create excessive anxiety, but the price of trying to ignore it is to be cut off from the most important ideas in academia today.

### The Postmodern turn

I have suggested that the new episteme organizing the emerging humanities and social science disciplines can be called 'postmodernism'. The term has often been criticised for being vague, inconsistent and faintly disreputable (see eg Frow [1993], who asked polemically "What was Postmodernism?"), so it would not be appropriate to enter here into a debate about what postmodernism is. For present purposes, I distinguish what I am calling the postmodern episteme from what critics such as Baudrillard (1984) have identified as 'postmodernity', a (or the) phenomenon of post-contemporary,

post-industrial life, a cultural form that marks the end of the possibility for culture as previously understood, in which history, rationality and sense have disappeared in a euphoric celebration of ephemerality. I am concerned instead with the kind of postmodernism which has grown out of the poststructuralist tradition, as in Lyotard's (1984) analysis of what he called "the Postmodern condition", in a work he subtitled "a report on knowledge".

Lyotard's survey of the state of contemporary knowledges points to the kind of understanding of the state of disciplinarity outlined above. Crucial to his analysis of the new episteme is what he sees as its 'linguistic turn', the tendency to see all disciplines and even many of their objects as forms of language, forms of discourse. This orientation is undoubtedly a distinctive characteristic of these approaches, and it has become one of the markers of a postmodern orthodoxy in certain academic circles. However, I feel that it would be dangerous and limiting to incorporate this aspect into any definition of postmodern thought, or the 'New Humanities' as a strategy of research. Most of the major figures in the construction of Postmodern thought, such as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard or Said, have denied the criticism that their works lead to an apolitical theoretical practice. They have all wrestled productively with the contradictions between an approach which seems to insist that concepts such as truth, justice, origin, agency and materiality are discursive effects, and a concern with areas of struggle and conflict where such relativism is disabling. Rather than the pure position on the primacy of discourse being the marker of postmodern thought, I see *awareness of the problem of discourse* as the better indicator.

I am using 'postmodernism' above all to emphasise the sense it gives of an open-ended receptivity to the unpredictably new, in particular its responsiveness to new themes and new ways of thinking, writing and producing knowledge. There are four ways in which Postmodernism in this sense has enhanced the possibilities for 'doing research'/'writing a PhD' in the Humanities. They are not tightly connected, so it is possible to be selectively 'postmodern', but together they make up a formidable potential for intellectual productivity.

- As a *strategy*—using the new technologies of the electronic media, as part of the basic literacy that is the entry condition into the New Humanities. These increase the scope of the texts that can be accessed (through data bases, CD-ROM, image scanners, sound-input, etc) and processed (through user-friendly software analytic packages), the communities that can be constructed (via email, the Internet) and the quality of the texts that can be produced (multimedia and desktop publishing packages, increasingly sophisticated standard word processing packages, complete with spell-checks and other compositional aids). Postmodern postgraduates have prosthetic ears and eyes. They are exposed to information saturation, informal as well as formal discourse, via sound and image as well through the written word. They are plugged in to a global community, dependent now on computer technicians and other buffs to catch up on the latest program or option, instead of being self-contained, highly literate individual scholars relying only on a secretary to type the final thesis.
- As a *style*—drawing on a long tradition of experimental avant-gardism, with its breaks with the modernist values of realism, transparency of text, linear logic, purity of genres, given philosophical weight and substance through theorists like Derrida and his reflections on writing, which for him designates "not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself. And thus we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general. [Thus] the entire field covered by the cybernetic program will be the field of writing" (Derrida, 1976, p. 9).
- As an *orientation*—able to affirm different kinds of order, accepting discontinuities, contradictions, without having to find or impose subsuming orders or over-arching unity and coherence, in kinds of text, kinds of logic, forms of community, in notions of

individual, identity and consciousness; alerted to complex processes of meaning and textuality pervading social life.

- As a *politics*—anarchist, populist, libertarian, an oppositional strategy against imperialist discourses of power and authority, recognising the validity of heterogenous voices, roles and subjectivities.

Problems arise, however, in seeing these qualities as simply added on to the repertoire of modernist theses, especially when from the point of view of modernist examiners postmodern virtues can seem like vices. The following table compares qualities of modernist and postmodern theses, with a further column giving their negative value from a modernist perspective—descriptors that a hostile examiner could use even for a high quality 'postmodern' thesis.

### The contexts of change

But revolutions, even benign intellectual ones, don't happen automatically, for a good reason: they aren't meant to happen. As I have argued, the regulations surrounding PhDs are not intended to encourage radical doctorates. Funding and other policies have a similar effect. Funding support comes through government (APRA) scholarships for a three-year period, primarily awarded on the basis of class of Honours, with the bulk of APRA's going to the small number of elite research universities, which are organized primarily along conservative disciplinary lines. APRA students tend to be conservative. For instance, 78% continued their higher degrees at the same institution they graduated from, compared to 50% for all research postgraduates (Witham, 1992). It is a system geared to selecting the brightest students in a cohort, channelling them through a disciplinary program before they have built up enough acquaintance with monsters to challenge the principle of disciplinarity. However, the system in Australia is currently much less monolithic than this picture suggests. There have been a series of decentering movements that together have disrupted the intent of the system and created propitious conditions for an efflorescence of New Humanities (innovative, transdisciplinary, critical) doctorates:

- On the international scene, 'New Humanities/Postmodernism' represents 'the leading edge' across the humanities and social sciences, disseminated more rapidly than used to be the case to a marginalized academic system such as Australia's. The brightest students know that they want it, and the colonial cringe if nothing else requires traditional universities to try to catch up.
- Peripheral institutions in the Australian system—'new' universities (1960-1986) and former CAEs (the post-1987 Universities)—were free to colonise the 'New Humanities' form of curriculum without competition from the prestigious traditional (pre-1960) Universities. The post-Dawkins expansion of the University sector saw significant expansion and reconceptualising in which the 'New Humanities' played a significant role, as one of the few areas where the post-1987 institutions were competitive in producing high quality research.
- The Dawkins reforms also created pressure on many staff at the newer universities, to upgrade their qualifications in order to become a 'real' teacher at a 'real' university. In 1993, for instance, 25.4% of academic staff at post-1987 Universities had doctorates, compared to 50.9% at "older established Universities" (Gallagher and Conn, 1995). This gives a pool of 9620 academic staff at the Dawkins universities with a perceived need to upgrade. This is a considerable number, given that only 1767 students in total commenced doctoral studies in 1990 (Witham, 1992). There were also staff at traditional universities who, for one reason or other, had stepped off the academic assembly line and were now being denied the promotion that their intellectual calibre and academic commitment would have entitled them to. These two groups together form a significant body of potential doctoral candidates who have the strengths of mature-age undergraduates in pushing the curriculum into new areas—a breadth of marginalised expe-

Modernism	Postmodernism (+)	Postmodernism (-)
piece of research	piece of writing	no content
research v writing	research as writing	too subjective
disciplinary	transdisciplinary	undisciplined
transparent style	opaque, difficult	too hard to understand
focussed topic	dispersed theme	much too ambitious
self-effacing	self-reflexive	self-indulgent
summarizes argument	strings quotes	unoriginal, pastiche
descriptive	creative/critical	not really a thesis
proves	performs	what is it saying?
clear print text	multimedia, experimental form	breaks rules for thesis
coherent world	fragmented world	not a clear picture
typical case	aberrant example, limit case	idiosyncratic, can't generalise
'research'-oriented	theory-driven	vague and jargon-ridden

rience, time for considerable reflection on the received (disciplinary) curriculum and its ills, a set of monsters waiting to come into the light.

Putting these considerations together, we have a picture in which it is likely that a reasonably high proportion of doctorates in the humanities and social sciences commenced or completed over the next five years will be broadly in the 'New Humanities' areas. Many of these will be undertaken by first class Honours students immediately after graduation, supported by APRAs at disciplinary universities, where the controls on substantial originality will remain tight. However, a significant number will be situated on some margin: highly motivated but marginal (mature, academically experienced, part-time) students, following marginal (transdisciplinary, applied, unique) courses of study at marginal (low status, and/or regional) institutions.

I believe that the overall quality of work produced especially by this latter category of student will be exceptional for this degree, more original than pre-1990 doctorates, more critical, more significant in national and international terms, to use the criteria applied by bodies such as the ARC. My sense is that already as a result of these factors there has been a quantum leap in the 'quality' of doctoral work now being undertaken in the humanities and social sciences, owing to the energising and catalytic effect of the 'New Humanities'.

I have no hard evidence for that belief, I should hasten to add, outside the thirty seven doctoral theses that I have supervised or examined over the past five years. For some time hard evidence will be hard to find, since judgements of quality, especially at this level, are so contentious. One indicator would be the number of doctorates which are already almost publishable as books that the writer wanted to write, and that readers will want to read: books or texts that matter, which rewrite the old fixed rules of the PhD genre so often that the original template disappears under the impenetrable palimpsest.

It is not clear how long the 'New Humanities' will be able to retain its sense of being subversive or revolutionary, its openness to change, its commitment to openness, or how many times the activity of deconstructing the genre of the PhD will be challenging and productive for every candidate. It is not clear either whether the practices in the non-sciences, already substantially different from what prevails in the sciences, will have systemic effects across the board. However, the greatest safeguard against change in the premises underlying the current system of doctorates is their taken-for-granted status, and it is hard to see how that can survive the cumulative and respectful erosive assault of the 'New Humanities' postmodern critique, if it is embodied

in thesis after thesis which takes for granted different assumptions of what a PhD is and why it is still a worthwhile thing to do.

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