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Conceptual Scholarship

CONSIDER SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING in its essential form: a gradual accretion of general ideas and bibliographical specifics satisfying the career anticipations of its authors and the documentation obligations of its readers. Scholars write to share their ideas and to receive credit for publication; other scholars read these published works mainly to identify the central ideas and amass bibliographic references for their own subsequent publications. Does traditional scholarly publishing best realize these needs? Could not these ends all be served if a journal published only central ideas and bibliographical references, thereby avoiding the great expenditures of human and material resources which now go into the production of traditional journals? The description of such a journal, called *Conceptual Scholarship, The Journal of Ideas*, is the subject of this discussion.

THE NEW JOURNAL. Imagine a quarterly journal which would be subscribed to by almost every member of the profession. In satisfying the essential needs of our publishing industry, the journal entries would contain the authors, titles, and abstracts of potential, or what I will call conceptual, articles. They would be listed in an extensive table of contents which would occupy the major portion of each issue. Each author would submit to the journal's editor a conceptual article consisting of author's name, the title of the article, and an eighty word abstract. This would be followed by a statement of the number of pages the article would occupy if it were fully written out as the author has imagined it, but naturally—and this is the point—the article itself would not appear. These conceptual articles could be further specified as belonging in one of the categories established in the traditional MLA annual bibliography. The editors of *Conceptual Scholarship, The Journal of Ideas* would then locate the article within the appropriate category in their own index and assign it the required number of pages in the consecutive listing of each journal's title. For example, Professor Edward de Vere's twelve page conceptual article identifying Shakespeare's Mr. W. H. might be listed with other Shakespearean items on page 47 of the journal and be assigned pages 3,682-3,693 as its official bibliographical listing. This would allow for full and complete citations by scholars who may wish to refer to or "quote" from this conceptual article in later, non-conceptual publications.

Conceptual scholarship, it must be noted, is not intended to replace traditional publication. *Conceptual Scholarship, The Journal of Ideas*, would supplement existing journals and satisfy both the practical and real intellectual requirements of academic publishing by providing maximum intellectual stimulation within the limited reading time available to the modern scholar.

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FORMAT FOR JOURNAL ENTRIES. This new journal is designed to be used in the following way. Each item published in *Conceptual Scholarship*, representing an idea existing in full only in the mind of its writer, will be identified in print only by author, title, abstract, and number of pages. But because traditional scholarly endeavor inclines towards specificity, and in fact depends upon accurate quotation, some provisions are needed to allow for integrating these conceptual articles into the frame of reference and the mechanism of quotation in traditional publications. Therefore, rules for citing and quoting from *Conceptual Scholarship* articles are as follows. Any scholar may refer to any *Conceptual Scholarship* article, summarize the argument, dispute the theory, mock the methodology, point out omissions—whether deliberate or accidental—introduce more recent references, correct factual inaccuracies, focus upon stylistic crudities, reinterpret data, and even quote specifically (although no more than fifty words at a time). In all these cases the scholar must imagine the fully worked out article implied by the entry in *Conceptual Scholarship*. The scholar, in short, may respond to *Conceptual Scholarship* articles in all the same ways that traditional articles are received, but without the limitations imposed by a tediously worded text.

Authors of the original *Conceptual Scholarship* articles must refrain from defending their intended meanings against possible distortion or misquotation until some reader has responded in print in a traditional publication. Anyone can see how these guidelines have quite far-reaching psychological and philosophical implications. Readers wishing to refer to or quote from *Conceptual Scholarship* entries will have to recreate each article in all the complexity, subtlety, and fullness that the original author intended, as indicated by the page allotment. However, once specific ideas, arguments, conclusions, and references from *Conceptual Scholarship* articles have been cited in other publications, obviously the original article no longer exists in the realm of pure thought. Traditional scholarly responsibility will therefore require that those (including its author) wishing to discuss a *Conceptual Scholarship* article must familiarize themselves with all references to it in other publications and respect each reference as having become inviolable parts of the article, not to be ignored in subsequent citation.

This accretion of paraphrase and citation may, when a popular *Conceptual Scholarship* article becomes the center of an important critical or theoretical debate, eventually recreate in its entirety the original conceptual piece. This process of course is not dissimilar to the way in which Aristotle's ideas were recreated from the notes of his students, or, more recently, Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was compiled from his students' notes, and the process finds a parallel in Borges' story "The Don Quixote of Pierre Menard."

This cumulative article will never be gathered together and written out in any single place. It will always require a complete bibliographical search in traditional journals for each reader to create it anew. But because of difficulties in locating all references and finding all cited journals, each recreated article will probably be as different from all others as any one of them is from the imagined original conception of the entry's author. I reserve comparison of this aspect of conceptual scholarship with contemporary reader-oriented criticism until later in the discussion.

Even though the original authors may eventually join in the debates surrounding their conceptual notions by publishing in traditional journals clarifications of their

original intentions, any printed passages attributed to the original conceptual article *must be accepted* by the original authors. This requirement is an innovation in scholarly procedures, to be sure, but a fertile one. It is possible that the authors' intended meanings may remain undiscovered by their readers and commentators. On the other hand, authors uncertain of their original meaning may discover, with the help of colleagues and readers throughout the scholarly community, how best to understand their own concepts, much in the same way that poets are surprised to learn the meanings literary critics are able to discover within their works. In every way the unknown will become known and the hidden will be made manifest. Both are proper activities, pursuits, and goals of responsible scholars.

ADVANTAGES OF THE NEW JOURNAL. Some of the advantages of such a journal should be clear by now. Because publishing an idea in *Conceptual Scholarship* would not preclude later publication in traditional journals, the second appearance would benefit from all the collegial assistance, feedback, corrections, and additional ideas, data, and bibliographical citations which its conceptual version inspired. The readers of *Conceptual Scholarship* will be freed from any pressures to ignore, misread, or distort new ideas, as is often the case with traditional scholarship, because the ideas they will be responding to will be their own. As they recreate from a title and an abstract the conceptual article that best fits their views, they will provide their own and hence the most relevant citations and examples to support their imagined article.

Among non-traditional scholars within the profession this journal will be especially welcomed. This category includes those whose talent lies in writing titles but who lack the interest or energies to develop their subjects; those who like to deal with ideas in their purest and most general sense, as adequately outlined in an eighty word abstract; those who do not require the security of the compulsively realized text; those who just like playing with possibilities; and those who have more ideas than time to develop them. Now, without an appropriate outlet for their creativity, these individuals are forced to bury their ideas in footnotes within traditional publications or lose them forever in lectures and conversations. Fortuitously, the appearance of this new journal will provide a copyright system for registering original ideas to protect idea-rich scholars against prepublication thefts. With *Conceptual Scholarship* in existence, even the most harried of teachers, buried under five composition courses in a community college, will be able to publish. Even chairpersons and administrators still keeping up their scholarship can find time to reassert their scholarly credentials. Advertisers will have a new outlet and audience, a new set of editors will be created and appropriately rewarded, and a new university press will be able to boast of its new journal.

Responsible scholars will no longer have to read through twenty or thirty different journals to locate new ideas in their fields, because despite what may be seen as a superficial similarity, *Conceptual Scholarship*, *The Journal of Ideas*, will in no way duplicate the *PMLA* abstracts or other collections which only appear to be conceptual in nature. Unlike the traditional abstracts, *Conceptual Scholarship* will be entirely self-contained. Its first readers will require, as they begin to imagine the article, no other journals or reference libraries containing back issues of hundreds of expensive, hard-to-obtain, and obscure journals. Furthermore, those who now read complete

articles will no longer be disadvantaged by having all their time taken up reading and then forgetting complex arguments and specific citations in numerous traditional articles. Of course, for those individuals who read nothing but abstracts now, this new journal may have little importance. For the rest, however, the impact of *Conceptual Scholarship* will be considerable. Instead of merely knowing what they have been able to remember, readers will now be able to remember everything they are capable of knowing.

EDITORIAL AND SUBSCRIPTION POLICIES. Editorial and subscription policies for the new journal are quite straightforward. All authors wishing to submit articles for consideration must be members of the Society of Conceptual Scholarship, paid membership in which provides free subscriptions to *Conceptual Scholarship*, *The Journal of Ideas* and entitles each member to submit and have published in the journal no more than one conceptual article per year. This provision is designed to attract the largest possible membership in the society and the greatest readership for the journal. Articles may be complete with abstract, as described above, may be review articles, book reviews, bibliographical checklists, brief Notes and Queries, or may assume any other traditional form of scholarly communication. The sole limitations are that articles remain within the boundaries of good taste, fit within the classification system adopted by the journal, and restrict their intended length to twenty pages. (This last rule has been adopted to prevent ambitious scholars from taking advantage of the journal and listing, as books, their unrevised dissertations.)

The fees from membership in the Society of Conceptual Scholarship, along with the advertising revenues, will support the journal and finance a number of worthy projects. These include fellowships to authors wanting paid leaves of absence to transform conceptual articles into traditional ones, cash grants to the best ideas published each year in the journal, and all convention activities the Society plans to sponsor. Society of Conceptual Scholarship debates will be scheduled as the final activity every night at Modern Language Association conventions. Noted scholars and critics will discuss selected conceptual titles for five minutes each, after which the authors will be allowed ten minutes to reply to the freshly reconstructed article before the audience joins the debates.

THE NEW JOURNAL'S EFFECT UPON THE PROFESSION. It is anticipated that the existence of the Society of Conceptual Scholarship and *Conceptual Scholarship*, *The Journal of Ideas*, will have beneficial effects upon the scholarly community. Publication will finally become a democratic process available to all, and once *Conceptual Scholarship* articles are cited in traditional journals they will become genuine links in the great chains of scholarship which bind our profession. The conceptual format promises great advances in resolving problems of fact and interpretation which have mystified traditional scholars for decades. Lost correspondence and other key documents can be recovered and described; the true intentions of ambiguous literary works can be resolved; proper endings for now unfinished works, such as "Kubla Khan," can be discovered and announced; in short, any one of the dozens of little uncertainties which now frustrate scholars and biographers in all fields can satisfactorily be cleared up in conceptual articles.

Perhaps the single most important contribution this new journal can make will be in expanding the understanding of present and future intellectual historians. Each

new issue of the journal will provide interested researchers with the opportunity to identify new intellectual trends before they surface, drawn out to unreadable length, in old-fashioned publications. Comparing conceptual and non-rigorous thoughts with their eventually fully-worked-out forms will provide other revealing data in the same way that textual scholars attempt to trace the development of realized works from initial notion through successive revisions. Comparison between the full range of conceptual ideas and the restricted scope of traditional publications may provide answers to questions about whether or not the profession is focusing upon and developing the best contemporary ideas. But mainly it is expected that the existence of *Conceptual Scholarship* will establish once and for all the relevance of literary scholarship to the important intellectual activities now taking place in other disciplines.

The most obvious parallel must be to the deconstructionist and reader-oriented ideas developed by contemporary continental theorists, ideas whose challenge to traditional notions of literary criticism and scholarship are creating much dissension within the profession. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), speaks harshly of these doctrines as "decadently skeptical forms," yet he manages to summarize their argument accurately when he writes:

. . . since genuine knowledge of an author's meaning is impossible all textual commentary is therefore really fiction or poetry. Emancipated by this insight, we can face the *écriture* of the past without illusion, as representing no stable or accessible meaning. We can write about writing with new-found creativity and freedom, knowing that we ourselves are creating a new fiction which will itself be fictionalized by those who read us. (p. 147)

Conceptual scholarship can be seen as not merely in accord with but as even an advance beyond these new critical theories, since the conceptual scholarship movement, in transferring responsibility for meaning to the reader, as the French theorists do, performs the task more efficiently by eliminating the potentially confusing and misleading signals provided by the original text.

But why limit the transfer from author to the individual reader? Why not involve the entire community of readers working together to create the text? The proto-text is removed to the author's mind, where it belongs; the collective readers' text comes forth as the true object for study and enjoyment. Thus conceptual scholarship takes the final necessary step to create scholarly unity, and at the same time squares the hermeneutic circle. This idea, of collective participation and infinite collaboration, so basic to conceptual scholarship, is a fundamental one for the continuing health of the scholarly community.

The appearance of *Conceptual Scholarship*, *The Journal of Ideas* is certain to raise the question of why some journals are considered more prestigious than others. Furthermore, it is conceivable that *Conceptual Scholarship* will be followed by even more radical publications. Instead of a stuffy list of titles, authors, abstracts, and page numbers, the indications of length might be dropped in one such possible journal. This would force each reader to imagine the conceptual article by contributing both development and scope. The eighty word abstract is, after all, rather prescriptive, so it too might disappear in some other alternative journal, leaving the reader with just a title to guide speculation. A further purification would omit titles as well as abstracts from the listings, providing merely the author's name and the number of

pages the intended communication should cover. Although this refinement will leave many readers insecure (there inevitably will be demands to include the name of an employing institution to provide at least some guidance for the implied quality of unknown personalities), evaluative preconceptions based upon reputation and influence alone are not unprecedented within the scholarly world. Finally, once the process of purification has begun in scholarship, fanatics may arise, as recent history has demonstrated so clearly in both art and politics. No one should be unprepared for entirely blank journals, of the sort already sold in popular bookstores, enticing scholars to participate in the ultimate conceptual and solipsistic venture: the creation of an entire journal unrestricted by any arbitrary guidelines or boundaries at all. And if present trends continue, these last and purest manifestations of conceptual scholarly activities, especially if preserved blank, may eventually become the only journals considered ecologically responsible to the shrinking material and intellectual resources of our planet.

Whatever forms conceptual scholarship takes, there can only be positive results upon the health of literary studies. Among graduate students new interests will develop in all phases of literary work. There certainly will be cross-fertilization between traditional and conceptual scholarship, and more assuredly this interchange will benefit both. Conceptual scholarship, after all, depends upon a base of traditional scholarship, and with acceptance of the journal, *Conceptual Scholarship*, traditional journals will be strengthened by an inundation of new ideas deriving from conceptual sources.

There should be no need for further argument and analysis to justify conceptual scholarship both as intellectual practice and incipient journal. We should now recognize that as intellectual practice conceptual scholarship would do as much good as traditional scholarship and would provide a more enjoyable activity. We may or may not confess that we do it anyway, already. It should also be clear by now that a journal such as that outlined here provides the most realistic, elegant, and enjoyable solution to the fundamental publishing needs of our profession: sharing ideas, establishing authorship, and citing scholarship. All readers of this discussion have already created a *Conceptual Scholarship* journal in their minds, imagined the articles which they would contribute for publication with their initial application for membership in the Society of Conceptual Scholarship, and contemplated the consequences this kind of publication would have for the traditional journals piled high and unread upon their bookshelves. Each reader's response has been different, for each has responded to these words in highly idiosyncratic ways, but in their collective responses conceptual scholarship has already been created as the newest dimension of literary studies.