One hesitates to disagree in any fashion with a fellow-teacher so canny, broad-minded and experienced as Allan Gilbert (CEA Critic, May 1967) in his suggestion, that we must not allow mechanical routines of organization to damage the essential relationship between the doctoral candidate and his advisor, he is absolutely right. But I would argue that the flaws in reading committees and prospectus reviews are only superficial aspects of the problem, and that there is deeper reason for our concern.

My guess is that in Professor Gilbert's long life of teaching he had, as we all have had, a disagreeable experience or two with some recalcitrant colleague on a doctoral committee, and that he is too much of a gentleman to be more specific. Choosing an 'abusive' approach, he sees himself up as a straw man, who would have to object to theses because of his dramatic conception of the Platonic dialogues, or his reformed opinions about the date of Samson Agonistes. His own candid indication of his potential biases is itself assurance that he is prepared to relax his rigidity when called upon to serve on a committee. Objecting to the dissertation prospectus as a device which may fix the solution in amber, he deplores any such obstacle to a change of view which comes with more mature knowledge.

I am quite sure that there are literal-minded and prejudiced professors who can be nuisances on committees, and young men who in their narrow knowledge and extreme eagerness to impress their elders with their superior knowledge make it hell for the oral. I have seen a prospectus worried and sent back five times for revision, because a dominant member of the graduate committee objected both to style and ideas. But I suspect that Professor Gilbert could reckon with such characters, and I submit that the candidate can learn by the experience as he sees how men of conviction and compassion deal with inexperience and difficulty and bias. Though the doctoral exams and examinations are the perpetual butt of our cynicism and our ennui, they are potentially the most heady experiences in an academic career, and often are the initiation to greatness. As agon, as drama of the student, whether he be literate or academic or financial, one has no chance to take advantage of serendipity.

Despite flaws in the workings of the prospectus and the reading committee, then, I conclude that they are a necessary concession to education within a culture or a community. Their virtues counter the flaws in the personal relationship -- the virtues of ignorance, of narrowness, of inexperience; very rarely, I think, flaws of collusion.

But of course we agree with Professor Gilbert that this relationship is the crucial one. Only thus can knowledge, technique, taste, and even civilization be passed down from one generation of scholars to another. Love for one's teacher is one of the deepest emotions of the profession: we see it in Festschriften, in all the beauty and brilliance, in the folklore about George Lyman Kittredge (a redoubtable champion of his candidates in the presence of the eccentric committee man), and in the block of related dissertations which can come from the work of a great scholar and teacher. With all the nonsense which goes on about the scholar who is a poor teacher we forget that the notable teachers are scholars who have a relationship with their students: Socrates, Mark Hopkins, Kittredge, C. S. Lewis, Scaliger, Panofsky, Brodeur, and a host of less glittering names. Since our mushrooming universities find such relationships expensive, they are always ready to decry them, and to take false consolation in the mass audience and the TV circuit. However socially necessary such substitutes for proper teaching may be, the movement from generation to generation in the transmission of learning knowledge and wisdom takes place neither in the giant classroom nor in the solitary study. On the undergraduate level the tutorial relationship is almost impossible today, though Harvard and Oxford and Princeton and even Ohio State have made bows in its direction. On the graduate level it is absolutely essential, the more so in this country because we cannot match the Oxford system of the past, and we sometimes must defer until graduate years the basic personal experience of man to man or woman to woman, or any combination you desire. Luckily legislatures are beginning to learn that it costs more to educate a graduate student than an undergraduate, and that this is not only because of nuclear reactors.

But sprawling size and its emulation does present a threat to this basic relationship, and it is not, I think, in Professor Gilbert's committees or prospectuses, since these are mere devices to seal the basic personal relationship and function and realization. A much greater danger is the mechanized departmental preliminary examination for the doctorate. Ohio State's English department has long been proud of its individualistic system. At the end of required course work the candidate seeks out a professor, presumably one with whom he is congenial in temperament and in field of specialization. If they get together they meet during a six-month period regularly for tutorial preparation for an examination in the fields of English and American literature. The meetings involve some agreement on readings, an assessment of prior preparation, a discussion of crucial facts and critical positions, a diagnosis of the student's capabilities and weaknesses, a "dry run" to break the ice for the formal examination. Together they choose a proper combination of five, including the advisor, who will share in the reading of the three-day written examination. Departmental secretaries type the candidate's handwritten answers and xerox them, so that each member of the committee can have a serious and not a perfunctory view of the answers, and not merely those of his own field. The most difficult questions are individually tailored to bring out the best in the student, whether he be a modern critic, a technical bibliographer, a folklorist, or a linguist. The committee helps by its supervision to see that the specialization is not too great; the advisor sees to it that the candidate is properly tested on the special field as well as the general. The oral follows about a week later. After the defense on presentation of the prospectus is worked out by the candidate and his advisor, the defense is set up, and the prospectus is submitted to the departmental Graduate Committee.

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GRADUATE COMMITTEES

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committee. Though this submission is
less pro forma, it is a check
for much such absurdities as "Commas in
Megan's Wake" or "Tragedy in Eng-
focus on the older professor and his newly
"Our responsibility is to keep up the quality."
If we want speedup it is our task also
to consider why there is slowdown. Per-
haps the English and American fields
have grown like Topsy, and there is some
reason to cut down the portions of the
field being examined to, say, three out of
six major periods and one out of three or
two technical subjects. Financial need is
the major cause of slowdown, complicated
by the tendency of students to marry
young and to have children. It is not the
professor who holds the students back; the
majority of them need to spur themselves
on by building up their confidence in them-
sew. And this almost always demands an
interested teacher, an advisor of the kind
I have mentioned. Sometimes this kind
of teacher is described as being paternalis-
tic, and it is argued that one makes more
responsible and mature doctoral candi-
dates by ignoring them—by letting them
make all their mistakes by themselves.
Teacher-student apathy, lack of commu-
nication, and the production line have not
been notable in making more responsible
B.A.'s, nor do they make better Ph.D.'s.
Strong men need advice and even a
shoehorn to cry on; brilliant men are more
conscious of their mistakes than the self-
confident and mediocre.

If a school is able to administer the
kind of traditional guidance of which I
have been speaking, it should not be
forced to turn to routine measures, the
desperate measures of schools which have
to many graduates students unadvisedly
lack the professorial help and talent to
provide personal instruction. The proper
answer is not to make such schools larger
or to imitate their failures, but to allow
the combined forces of government fellow-
ship, publicity, and freedom of choice to
shape the burden of students with those
schools whose professoriate still has a
sense of responsibility.

One fears that another reason for such
abridgment of the proper advisor-student
relationship is the lowering of the age
brackets within the professoriate. The
timeless wisdom that an older professor
and his newly
fledged colleague. Yet generational gaps
in faculties grow, because of market pres-
ures and raiding, and the younger men,
less secure in their own personal assur-
ances, seek to substitute machinery for
mature guidance. More and more young
men are being thrown quickly into ad-
visory tasks, and they have conscience
enough to worry about their performance.
Perhaps they worry too much about its
role in their own promotion, and their
repudiation is increased by the cynical
slogan of "publish or perish," by submis-
siveness to bureaucracy even while picket-
ing against it, by experience as excluders
of the incompetent student of Freshman
English, and even by the sophomoric po-
position, present to all of the newly initiated:"Now I'm in and I can keep you out."
These are not my inventions; I have been
told such things in confidence.

Such young men are the salt of the
earth and the future teachers and scholars
of excellence. They will have to learn
through an agon and a perpetual drama
much more wearying and traumatic than
that of the Ph.D. which is its gentle pre-
lude. I have no doubt that they too will
sometime believe as strongly as Professor
Gilbert or I that the closeness of the ex-
pert and his apprentice is the salvation of
the academic world. A doctor is no mere
product of a bureaucracy or a system; he
is a man who has come into contact with
many fine minds among his own genera-
tion, teachers a little older than he and
teachers much older than he. He may
know many well, but the charge on the
system is that he know one especially
well. And the more skillfully he has been
trained the more quickly he will himself
adapt to the system, and the more surely
he will be able to contribute himself to
the continuity of learning.

Nothing I have said is meant to stifle
the normal present spirit of rebellion, of
adjustment to necessity, of re-examina-
tion of the weaknesses in the system and
their correction. But even in these days of mass action, needed in a time when a nation
has grown fat and heedless of social dis-
ease, the training of the expert must not
be trifled with. Indeed, it is wanted more
than ever in a time of transition, in a time
when we question the ineptness of admin-
istration, the flaws of over-
organization, the inhumanity of com-
puter-run universities. At the center of
such training sits the devoted scholar and
teacher who really has something to teach
to the doctoral candidate with whom he
works intimately. That candidate has
survived a battery of questionable tests
from kindergarten up. He will not be im-
proved by another one, which is based
on statistics and not upon expert
direction. Properly fulfilled, a doctoral candidate is
a work of art, unique and priceless. We
need to contribute to this fulfillment,
you can't hire a work of art without an
artist. These are days when symbols are
appreciated, and it might be well to recall
the Creation of Adam on Michelangelo's
Sistine Ceiling.

FRANCIS LEE UTLEY

The Ohio State University

November, 1967

THE CEA CRITIC