The Elephant Paper and the Histories of Medieval Drama

In “Disillusionment at 10 O’Clock,” the American poet Wallace Stevens tells of a haunted house with colors that are not there. There are rings. Many scholars claim the poem is about ghosts, or that creative people live much richer and more colorful lives than ordinary dull people, represented by the colorless nightgowns. The purpose of this paper is to argue that “Disillusionment at 10 O’Clock” is really about an elephant.

The opening paragraph above is in a genre that most of us have confronted so many times that we are incapable of recognizing a parody, even one we ourselves have constructed. The gratuitous naming of the poem, the poet, often a reference to the date, details from Wikipedia or the introduction to whatever text we have forgotten we have assigned—all coming to a crushing end in the topic sentence closing the first paragraph, exactly where we have been taught and have taught that a writer should insert a thesis.

The poem is about an elephant.

Once we have an idea, we are ready to imagine a coherent argument and to begin constructing a coherent paper. As I have taught many times, after writing the opening paragraph, you don’t really need to do much else: the paper more or less writes itself. Whether refereeing journal articles or reading student papers, I have made nearly all my evaluations after that first paragraph. I know whether I will recommend it for publication or give it an A-: the rest of my time will be spent marshaling the
evidence and rhetoric to support that decision. All that remains is determining which sections I will highlight, which sentence or expression I will quote directly, what “minor points” I will make at the end of my report.

“Disillusionment at Ten O’Clock” is about an elephant. The poem is an elephant. The paper is an elephant.

To begin with, Stevens’s poem is not overly small, nor are the points it makes small; and elephants, as we all know, are large.

[I draw an elephant on the board; it is stylized, mannered, large, and with luck, I will make it not appear to be a cartoon mouse. Ears, tusks, looking straight ahead, with one giant foot raised.]

Note that this elephant, mannered on the chalkboard, consists entirely of lines, much like the poem. In fact, referring to elephants in the real world, rather than in the imaginary two-dimensional one (and Stevens, as we know, was constantly comparing the real to the poetic world) we see that the relationship is even stronger. The lines of the poem are like the lines in the skin of the elephant, the folds of the skin. Note too, that the very lines of the poem are written in feet (elephants have four) and many poems (this one is the exception that proves the rule) are written in octosyllables, that is, four feet!

There are as many words for poems as there are words for elephants: hephalumps, pachyderms, Dumbo. The poem is entirely of words, and in fact, some of the more imaginary elephants, as well as the scientific classification of them, are largely(!) dependent on words, as are the sailor and baboon here. Stevens’s poem is far from an easy one; elephants too can be difficult. There are many grey areas in the poem, ambiguities, just as there are grey areas in the elephant. Arguably, there is a key to the poem, and the tusks of the elephant, as everyone knows, were once, back in Stevens’s day, made into the keys for the piano. Coincidence?

One of the more striking features of the poem is the baboon. Although some scholars have noted the blue and red face and posterior of the baboon, aligning itself in various mysterious but unknown ways with the planet-like rings of color preced-
ing this, it should not be forgotten that baboons are first and foremost wild animals associated with a (real? mythological?) jungle environment, as are, of course, elephants.

Elephant is three syllables, as are the first three words of the Stevens’s poem.

Elephants I believe eat bamboo (the similarity in sounds to baboons is noteworthy). The reference to bamboo is unaccountably repressed in the poem, although the allusion in the absence of form more than makes up for this.

The contrast of color to the surface of the elephant could not be more obvious.

The poem is an elephant. The poem is about an elephant. The paper is an elephant. All papers are elephant papers.

I used to demand that students incorporate a thesis statement in their papers, unconsciously channeling my own high school teacher: it was how I did things myself. It all seemed so obvious: you just say directly and clearly that Shakespeare sonnets are about, oh, dark ladies, elephants, or even what they say they are about. What could be clearer than that? Yet one day, I was drawing a familiar chalk elephant on the board, pretending to amuse my students, asking them, for my sake, to do anything other than write the elephant papers they had been taught to write. To do anything other than to take poem X and announce that it was not really poem X, but rather an elephant. I began laughing at myself although no one heard me. It was on that day that I began to take my own advice. Or at least, try. And that is why there are no thesis sentences here.

Groupe Annales

The Annales Group of historians built their enterprise on a polemic: history should not be written top-down, but from the bottom up. This particular metaphor could be read in at least two ways. First and foremost, it meant that history would not be limited to court-gossip, kings and queens, conquests, battles. It would rather be written of labor, ordinary people, peasants,
food production, the elimination of horse excrement from the trenches of a siege in the Middle Ages, and so on. The slogan could be read another way as well: history would not be written down from grand abstractions such as historical periods, centuries, or nations. That is, it would no longer be written uncritically, or even according to the critical methods of Karl Popper, starting with a hypothesis which all the facts would then put to the test.¹

As if to enforce the renunciation of abstractions, many in this school developed a formal writing tic: articles and studies would begin, not with a grand thesis, but rather a small and specific anecdote (an example most familiar to English readers is Robert Darnton’s Great Cat Massacre)² from which the scholarly work would develop. A large portion of the articles in literature or the humanities I read in English today have adopted this model. On the one hand it is maddening. On the other, is epitomizes the theory: basic to the argument is not a thesis, but a set of facts—an anecdote.

There is a noticeable difference between early work in this school—work such as Marc Bloch’s Feudal Society (1939–40), and later works, such as Georges Duby’s Trois Ordres (1978) or Fernand Braudel’s Civilization and Capitalism (1955–79).³ Bloch’s Feudal Society seems in search of its organizing principles, and even important concepts and categories: the first feudal age, the second feudal age, and of course feudalism itself are difficult to discover, define, or even critique, as they are lost, it seems, in


some pattern of plowing furrows or evidence of crop rotation. Emmanuel Le Roy la Durie’s *Montaillou* (1975) is similar; here the scholar defines a body of seemingly amorphous evidence (inquisitorial records) and asks a question of that evidence that it was never intended to address, taking from it facts it recorded with uninterest and thus disinterest: the events of everyday life. The categories that finally control this evidence are no more than chapter headings, and there is no attempt to reproduce or critique the patterns of thought that either existed in the witnesses or were projected there by scholars. Under this method, it doesn’t really matter whether the witnesses are biased, afraid, making excuses, or confessions, since the data in their testimony consists of facts neither they nor their inquisitors cared at all about: the nature of the doorstep they were sitting on when a certain heretical conversation took place inside; what were their working hours that gave them the leisure to eavesdrop on others. All this serves as evidence of grander things — privacy, sexual mores, the concept of the Truth, the economics of the village.

But these methods and the assumptions underlying them soon became tangled in other, quite contradictory assumptions, and the kind of history that Annales historians rejected began to appear in their own writings in different form. Rather than a ruling monarchy or nation controlling the movement of evidence, a large abstraction takes over, such as Duby’s notion of *mentalités*, a version of the more creaking and obsolete notion of *Zeitgeist*: there are certain mental patterns, and mental forms that produce a series of variant structures in the real world (most notably for Duby, the notion of Three Estates). For Braudel, the notion of *la longue durée* invites us to see nothing but continuities beneath the cacophony of evidence. *Le grand récit* of the nineteenth century reappears in a new guise.

History is continuity. Events are *really* manifestations of abstract mental patterns.

And suddenly, it is elephants again, all the way down.
Book History

If the world were a coherent, rational, and intelligible place, then scholarly methods would be well suited to describing it. But the world is not such a place, and scholarly methods, particularly in the humanities, are much better at articulating their own truths.

What I am contrasting here are two primary and competing interests: (1) the “heaps of books” that we might find on a library shelf, with a dealer, or even in our homes, vs. (2) the catalogue—that is to say, a coherent statement of what those books are: this could be an enumerative bibliography (that is, a book list), the electronic card catalog of a particular library, or a descriptive bibliography (that is, a catalogue of definitions of editions that enables us to define individual copies of those editions as essentially “the same” (see Chapter 6 above).

Catalogues and their entries are most amusing and interesting because they are full of mistakes, and the discovery of those mistakes is a rewarding and not particularly difficult task. The catalogue adopts the omniscient tone I have spoken about in my introduction: on this basis of omniscience, it then describes the individual object. And the individual object, in my experience, always and inevitably resists (referring again to Stevens) “almost successfully.”

There is thus always work to be done in this area of cataloguing by non-cataloguers—a note, an article, a chapter. Scholars have the luxury of devoting far more time to individual cases than any cataloguer could. And there is always a reason for such work: the resistance of the single object calls into question the principles of the much grander thing—the catalogue, the bibliography, the entire industry of book history.

The Growth and Progress of Growth and Progress

Nineteenth-century scholars developed a theoretical model in which to organize material: in the areas I have worked in, a most noteworthy example was in medieval drama. Medieval
drama was well suited to this model; it is vast, repetitious, largely unreadable. After going through Arnoul Gréban's 30,000-line *Mystère de la Passion*, we might be excused from thinking that if you have read one of these Passion cycles, you have read them all. Much scholarship in this area was consequently designed to relieve other scholars from the basic business of reading it. The most useful example of this in English is Karl Young's *Drama of the Medieval Church*, where centuries of Latin drama are organized in such a way as make it possible not only to find examples of these plays, but to place new discoveries within his categories and implied histories. Young's theory organizing these plays is that medieval drama evolved within set genres from simple to complex. This theory (or principle of organization) was often challenged but never really tested by going through the evidence. A simple and obvious way to do this might have been to line up forms defined in Young with the dates assigned to individual texts: does the pattern support or refute Young's thesis.

That is what I attempt below.

In order to perform this test, I limited myself to Young's vol. 1 and the genre or play-type Visit to the Sepulchre, where Young's theory is most prominent. I did not second-guess any of the dates assigned to manuscripts, but simply accepted what his notes claim, for example “saec. xii” (most of his examples are dated only by century, and obviously they were not so dated using the same criteria). Young defines a progression of five steps, grouped into two “Stages.” The Table below indicates the number of manuscripts Young cites in his text (that is, for Stage IA, two thirteenth-century manuscripts, eleven fourteenth-century

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5 Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933). See, as an example in the same area, the series Records of Early English Drama (http://reed.utoronto.ca/), whose individual volumes, presenting presumably unmediated evidence, are far less useful than the fully organized summary by Ian Lancaster, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography to 1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
ones). When a manuscript is given a range (such as late twelfth-/ early thirteenth-century), I have in most cases classed it in the later century.

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Table 1. Manuscripts cited in Young’s text.

Looking at this, the difficulties in Young’s theory are apparent. The table supports the notion that Stage IA is early; it has several examples from the tenth through twelfth centuries, which the other forms do not. Beyond that, there is very little one can conclude from this, other than that fifteenth-century manuscript and printed versions of all types (except for the early type IA and fully developed type IIC) are more common than others.

Arranging the examples given in Young’s extensive and systematic notes in volume 2 gives similar results, suggesting I think that the examples chosen by Young to include in his text were representative of those available to him: 6

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6 The tables are very rough. Many references are doubtless repeated in Young’s notes, which I have not attempted to eliminate. I am also certain I made several embarrassing errors, quickly reducing “saec. xii,” “thirteenth-century,” and “1487” to my arabic listing here. Printed service books also skew these results, as Young notes, Drama, 2:637n2. I am not sure what to
### Table 2. Manuscripts cited in Young’s notes.

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The pattern claimed by Young again is supported in some cases: IA is the simplest form and found in the earliest manuscripts. But there is no obvious progression that is supported by the numbers: fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscript versions are more common than others, which tells us almost nothing.

This is only a first step. It does not settle the matter of Young’s theories. It only sets out the relationship between the evidence and the theory of dramatic development, that is, the chronological relationship between various forms. Any argument for or against this theory needs to confront the ambiguity of these figures and determine how that is to be accounted for (I would likely account for it by arguing that the chronological argument is false, or at least unsupported by evidence). Yet this simple and obvious procedure is one that neither Young’s critics nor Young himself seemed to choose. Young likely developed his theory before collecting all his evidence (the theory was a useful way to organize that evidence). But Young’s critics developed no test of this theory. Instead, his book led simply to counter-theories,

do with certain examples, e.g., those in Young’s note 2:677–78n1 and have not included them.
often ones with far more speculation than put forward by Young himself.7

When I last moved, I decided to throw out five large loose-leaf notebooks, each page with notes on scholarly books, all arranged in an arbitrary set of categories I got from an undergraduate “Guide.” One of those was on Maurice Sepet’s Les Prophètes du Christ: Etude sur les origines du théâtre au Moyen Age (Paris: Didier, 1878). I cannot remember many of the details from Sepet, who argued that the Prophet Plays (the Ordo Prophetarum) were at the origin of all medieval drama.8 What I can remember is my summary statement (I wrote these at the end of each notecard, knowing that some day in the future I would have to cite the book it summarized, and would have to do so in a single-sentence note). What I focused on was Sepet’s use of the word *loi* to describe his own organizational scheme, a word that, at least to a late-twentieth-century reader, had to be taken as a metaphor with the same meaning as the word *law* in such phrases as “Boyle’s Law.” It refers less to the workings of a mysterious force in literature or nature than to the schemes observers can use to organize their results.9 The simple-to-complex model thus was not history, but rather the way to organize one’s view of history.10

Again, my memory fails: I know that Sepet gave evidence of having read all the Prophet Plays, and at the time, I was naive

8 These are most familiar to medieval students from the variant in the twelfth-century Jeu d’Adam. They are included also in Young, “The Procession of Prophets,” *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2:125–71.
10 Although I did not know this then, nineteenth-century dramatic scholars did not invent this model of “growth and development”; they rather began with the genial narrative histories of earlier scholars, such as Luigi Riccoboni’s *Histoire du théâtre italien* (Paris: Cailleau, 1730), a history translated and included in the introductions to several English dramatic anthologies of the eighteenth century.
enough to discover from personal diligence that this is not at all an interesting intellectual exercise. But after that, it is all a jumble. It would have been better, perhaps, to have read Sepet and left the plays alone, since reading them took all the energy I could more profitably have spent on critiquing the way Sepet presented them. Most contemporary scholars are not in a position to respond to this statement; and until they do what I did, and attempt to reconstruct what Sepet once did to form his grand récit, they will just have to take my word for it.