Burn after Reading: Vol. 1, Miniature Manifestos for a Post/medieval Studies + Vol. 2, The Future We Want: A Collaboration

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The idea of writing a “manifesto” for this panel was particularly appealing to me for two reasons. First, I like being around people who work heavily in theory. Their perspectives and ideas continually challenge my own, even if, since I’m but a simple historian by training, I don’t always understand what they’re talking about. I implore my fellow panelists to therefore use small words so that I can follow along ...

Second, and more seriously, this panel became especially too good to pass up, in light of a recently rejected grant application to the NEH. Although generally positive in his/her comments, one reviewer said of my proposed project that Medieval Studies had no need of new methodologies. Now, there were caveats to this claim, but (to
get to my point) this person’s comment serves a useful purpose, since the whole point of a straw man is for there to be something to set alight. So, let me attempt (in my own modest way) to do just that. I don’t intend to fire the straw man directly; let me instead try to torch the whole field. Part of the task of the scholar, as I see it, is to be daring. High risk, high reward, but also high rate of failure. If the straw man burns, so be it. If it singes me as well, so be it. Perhaps, looking around, the field’s already on fire.

So, in the rest of this very brief mini-manifesto, let me try to set out the problem, and diagnose its causes. I hope there are suggestions in here somewhere. More likely, some in the audience will already have thought much about this and offer me help.

The problem I want to talk about is the tyranny of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship. The questions they asked of the period still define our work. We’re still trapped, still stuck within their “textual community,” trying to answer questions that are inherently teleological, always seeking answers to their end. We still seek to separate “religious” things and “secular” things. Nevermind that religio and saeculum had very different meanings than they do now. We still look at biblical citations through Protestant glasses, finding a verse from Jeremiah in an eleventh-century chronicle, and thinking “Jeremiah,” when we should be thinking of the accreted weight of centuries of exegetical tradition. We still think in terms of nationalistic lineages in our literatures, as if the Anglo-Norman scribe of the Oxford Roland had Louis XIV in mind when he was writing; as if Domesday necessarily led to Henry VIII.

Part of the reason for this disconnect has to do with the shape of the university. We still live in faculties created around the questions that animated our ancestors, subdivided into disciplines that made sense ca. 1900. We’re created within this paradigm, live within it, progress, then produce others in our image. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. In itself, it’s a noble, artisanal pursuit. But we should, at least, acknowledge the paradigm exists. Its power comes from our tacit complicity.
So, instead of asking what more we can say about this or that source, instead of asking if we can know this or that event more accurately, perhaps we should first be asking other questions. After all, we know that Hugh Capet began a dynasty that would last for centuries, but he certainly didn’t know there was a Philip the Fair in his future. For Hugh, the movement of time was contingent, uncertain, changeable. It isn’t radical to say that looking backwards gives the illusion of narrative. This was as true for the ninth-century Franks as it is for us today. You see a path back to where you started and try to clear the accumulated brush. Yet, our subjects saw something different. They saw a field and a far distant goal. In that field, they walked, doubled-back, tried another way, and sometimes ended up far removed from where they intended. Our job is not only to find that path, but more importantly to find those footprints—all those footprints. And sometimes, for us to see those footprints, we shouldn’t just clear the brush. Sometimes, we might need to set the whole field alight.