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

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Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.

Søren Kierkegaard

Let’s just run with it. The potentially instructive, because utterly naïve, thought experiment of entertaining for a moment that we have never been modern. Forget modernism—what if modernity never happened? Not that we know what “modern” even means, except as an empty qualifier perched with pomp at the crest of history. Then again, that’s precisely the point. Modernity, like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history looking over its shoulder, has always been running from what it no longer wants to be, shouting “not that! not that!” And yet—and it’s a big yet—if we are becoming increasingly convinced by Bruno...
Latour, then not only were we never not medieval, but medieval no longer has to mean “premodern.” If Benjamin’s angel of modern history can’t stop looking backward and defining itself in opposition to what it sees as a sort of negative immanence (what, in the past, it fears and loathes), then perhaps “to be medieval,” as Andrew Cole and D. Vance Smith have put it, “is to posit a future in the very act of self-recognition, to offer a memory or memorial to a future that will be recognized at a time and place not yet known.”¹ A future, that is, which positively transcends presence.

This isn’t just another way of gesturing to what Maura Nolan (following Adorno) calls the “absent presence” of the medieval. In a stronger sense, we are and have always been mid aevum, amidst the ages that have been and those that will be, between the already and the not-yet, as Deleuzian theologians of the eschaton have put it.² Among them, St. Augustine reiterated the paradox of temporality by noting that the future doesn’t exist except in the present, the future-present. And the psychological mode proper to the present? Attention. What to attend to? Why, to participating as much as possible in what we want (the future) to become. Which starts, has already started, now. As the Stagyrite said, since we are becoming and not yet being, there are traces of what we may be—but are not yet—in what we are now. Even Aquinas knew that existence precedes essence. Žižek said something similar recently, but with more utopian (as opposed to eschatological) intent: that only by treating certain critical signs of the present order as if they were signals from the future is revolution possible.³ In any case, accounting

for Augustinian *temporal distension* is a tenuous position to find oneself in, because it is a position that one cannot construct, but must *find oneself in*. And this exciting fact abides: if time (and tensed language) is the house of Being, then we its inhabitants live and act in something like the subjunctive mood, with all the Heideggerian resonance of “mood” and its Anglo-Saxon source in *mod*, a mindful comportment or attentive disposition. Beyond and constitutive of subjectivity, is subjunctivity, the future conditional.

A medieval studies in the subjunctive mood would strive to articulate the ways in which medieval perspectives were hybrids of desirous hope for the not-yet and humble realism about the already-is, akin in more recent terms to a balance of Derrida’s *avenir* and Harman’s *allure*. Indeed, the *futurity of the medieval* has not been lost on certain moderns, whether in the artificial sublimity of Meillassoux’s Tertullian-esque wagering on the impossible possibility of the birth of God or in the cultural halo of the Hegelian Spirit in Mannheim’s delineation of heterodox chiliasm as the birth of utopia. In dealing with medieval futures, with what medieval persons and texts and agents wanted their future to become, moreover, we therefore deal weirdly with our own present, which is, after all, the (historical) fulfillment of the future of the medieval. It thus might be worth wondering whether we can strive paradoxically to move forward with medieval projections into the futures they imagined, the futures that ended up *becoming us*, and to do so as a way of grasping the *non-continuous contiguity* of historical periods. This admittedly demands some kind of folly-and-mystery-embracing leap on the part of the scholar, one that itself must be rigorously underwritten by a critical yet non-hypocritical naïveté (not unlike what Jane Bennett has recently called for in speculative orientation to non-humans). Yet wouldn’t we be laughed off the stage if we asked how medieval anticipations of the future overlapped with our speculations about the past, like two arms folding over the lap of history’s night? Or, following the lead of fantasy and science fiction writers like J.R.R.
Tolkien and Walter M. Miller, Jr. and political scientists like Jörg Friedrichs and Richard Ned Lebow, how they overlap with our own imagined futures?  

We probably would. Nonetheless, asking such naïve questions may be the first step toward a medieval studies in which the desire to relate with affective yet critical understanding to medieval pasts can quite simply merge with the delineation of medieval anticipations of future-presents that have intelligible but not reductive associations with our own. The aim is to cultivate something like empathy, or Stein’s *Einfühlung*, toward the past. After all, “no matter how rigorous our historicism, no matter how playful our post-structuralism, the Middle Ages remains both alien and familiar, total and local *at the same time*.”  

While what I’m trying to evoke here is nothing more than an ethos or comportment, in light of the inevitable complexity of any such problematizing gesture toward periodization, if we are serious about recognizing robust, tradition-grounded differences and contiguities within and between temporal multiplicities, then we are going to need determinate and recombinative narrative images of the medieval pasts that we are privileged and condemned (‘destined’ is too weak a word) to non-identically repeat.  

So here, as a preliminary heuristic, are three general modes or moods of medieval subjunctivity, each of which styles futural contingency with varying degrees of prepa-

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5 Maura Nolan, “Making the Aesthetic Turn: Adorno, the Medieval, and the Future of the Past,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34.3 (Fall 2004): 570 [549–575].
ration, resistance, or openness:

I. (Religious) Imminence: Apocalypse or Death Comportment: the future as an approaching, ineluctable actant

II. (Chivalric-Economic) Adventure: The Pursuit of Happiness Comportment: the future as risky yet profitably opportune actant

III. (Political) Prudence: Struggling with Fortune Comportment: the future as a dangerous yet strategically manageable actant

These comportments and the details of their diegetic unfolding can offer a productive milieu, I think, for close (phenomenological) and distant (structuralist) readings of contingency and temporal distension. Methodological hazards aside, it is important to become increasingly sensitive to the ways our cultural institutions and affairs are partial fulfillments and betrayals of the hopes, plans, or fears of medieval thinkers, because doing so can thicken our tactical repertoires for not only surviving but also thriving in the academy, especially in the face of the exigencies of humanities education today. The academy, including the impactful assemblages of classroom and publishing, is a site for the enactment of an attentive psychological mode proper to the past-present: “recollection.” To “recollect” is: 1) to assemble and reassemble for purposes of dialogue in a common material location (even if disseminated via digital technologies), and, for the humanities, and, 2) to engage at such assemblies in the comported remembrance and exploration of that which according to the logic of global capitalism is deemed utterly valueless, in part because it can offer such acute vantages on present intentionality: the past. A truly democratic culture, after all, must insist that a voice be extended, as Chesterton suggested, to the dead. Through recollection, medieval studies can teach modernity how to appreciate its post-medieval obligations without slipping into histor-
ical Darwinism. So let’s dare to see potential not only in medieval studies’ methodological apparatus but also in its unique mixture of institutional materiality (of codicology, building code, and digital code), potential for tempering the field’s charming dustiness (as the public sees) with a commitment to itinerant forms of dialogue, publication, credentialing, and pedagogy, not least as a political counter-response to our field’s nationalistic origins. Collaboration and anonymity, familiar to pedagogy but still foreign to textual research, will need to take on important new roles. But we’ll also have to extend our aims beyond the academy, where, suffice it to say, we have friends whose contributions will be invaluable. So where, you may ask, are all these new St. Benedicts capable of participating in and organizing para-academic networks of hospitality, intellectual labor, apprenticeship, public debate, and philosophical community? (Look in the mirror.) One early step will be for academics and para-academics to adopt a readiness—which, as Hamlet rightly insists, “is all” (5.2.223)—to inquire into a topic which it is long since time to broach: namely, what it might mean to have wanted and then rejected a cenobitic form-of-life beyond the biopolitical parameters of instrumental capital. The question of the hour to come, in other words, if we are talking about medieval studies as a network of material collectives and imperatives, will have to do with how the vestiges of the European monastic fragmentation, a lacuna eventually filled by the modern multiversity and a central factor for understanding the latter’s predicament, have always remained with us, are us, the unceasing dissolution of the humanities.

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