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

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My title is borrowed from a book by John D. Niles on the pervasiveness of storytelling among human beings.¹ Niles investigates oral literature from both an anthropological and a cultural perspective and demonstrates its socio-cultural grounding and significance. We think in stories and narrativize our experiences in the world. We transform objects, natural processes, and unrelated occurrences into narratives by establishing links of coherence and causality, by adding personification and anthropomorphism, and by projecting feelings onto that which surrounds us. We tell stories to soothe, to debate, to invite response, to strengthen friendship, to remember, to argue,

to bond, and to define our identity—the list could be extended endlessly, so manifold are the reasons and motivations behind the storytelling impulse.

Within medieval studies, I have the impression we have neglected, even lost our interest in literature as narratives and have replaced it with trusting our own powers of creating narratives instead. The broadening of the field towards new and without doubt exciting theoretical approaches, such as object-oriented criticism, and the ever-growing influence of internet-based methods and forms of communication, create new narratives, about people, concepts, objects, and discourses, resulting in a narrativization of narratives. Despite our concern about critique and our awareness of our methods and scholarly distance, I believe we need to be much more conscious about both medieval narratives and processes of narrativization and our own input and interpretation of them.

Hence my rant is about what I perceive to be a general neglect of the parameters of medieval narratives and the processes that create, underlie, and fuel them. Niles’s term *homo narrans* is deliberately modelled upon the term *homo sapiens* and suggests, quite rightly so, the anthropological constant of the concept, which links our postmodern society with pre-modern people and thinking. Back to the narratives! This does not mean that I proclaim a return to close reading in the worst kind of narrowness and the exclusion of any form of context, nor that I am in fervent favour of either structuralism or surface reading. On the contrary: I think a return to the narratives should focus on the *strategies* of narrativization, their processual, dynamic, flexible, fluid, dialogic elements, in other words, what makes them narratives in relation to the poets’ self-understanding, the contexts of the stories, their intertextualities, their engagement of the audience as well as their impact, functions, and potential of creating affectivity. A.C. Spearing, among others, has recently made very interesting suggestions about reading medieval first-person narratives, readings that I find highly suggestive and which shed new light on how to read the ‘I’ in medi-
eval texts. At the same time, I see a danger in applying meta-narrative readings, of which Franco Moretti’s study *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* is a prime example. Moretti attempts to narrativize literary history using as his narrative form abstract models borrowed from statistics. Yet his graphs in no way do justice to the complexities of a history of narratives; they even suppress it, and reduce literature to non-narratives, to abstractions that make literary scholars unnecessary and rob us of our sources. Maybe the Middle Ages as a period are un-narratable as a whole because they are so varied, and because manuscript culture does not allow for the one story to be told—but for a variety of plots that demonstrate a pervasive stability and come in many disguises.

Am I proclaiming a paradigm shift towards narrativization? Yes, because I believe a new focus on narrative and narrativization would enable us to discover medieval literature anew so that the ostensibly known and familiar can acquire a new alterity, which subsequently becomes a new familiarity, thus transforming the texts by what may be their most basic aspect: the fact that they tell stories. Of course such a focus on narratives and narrativization requires the inclusion of and reliance on the many theories and approaches available, which can be brought into a happy union. Perhaps the post-postmodernist period can be heralded by the return to the narrative and the rediscovery of narration as the fundamental force of literature.

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