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

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A text is being historicized. As with Freud's famous essay on the fantasy “a child is being beaten,” what matters most is the fantasy that the vague statement covers over.¹ What is the fantasy that historicism supports? Numerous arguments have been raised against historicism.² However—

² A complete discussion of such critiques would be difficult to summarize, but a partial list might include Joan Copjec’s Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), Christopher Lane’s work, as well as specifically medieval scholarship such as Aranye Fradenburg’s Sacrifice Your Desire: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer (Minneapolis: Uni-
er, my interest here lies less in those arguments than in exploring the fantasy that undergirds both historicism as well as its renunciation. What might it mean to give up historicism? Moreover, what might it mean to abandon a practice, as opposed to abandoning an object? This essay troubles the idea of letting go of historicism by suggesting that historicism is itself a kind of letting go, a relinquishing of the historical object to a distant past. So, to let go of historicism is to refuse to let go of the historical object. This refusal, however, remains obscured and unacknowledged beneath a fantasy of historicism’s historicity.

In order to set up this kind of thought experiment, I will use the psychoanalytic concepts of mourning and melancholia as a way to explore the fantasy of historicism. The two processes (i.e., mourning and historicism) are not the same. However, it may be productive to see what is gained by understanding historicism as a kind of mourning, a way of mourning and of letting go of the historical object (be it text, artifact, person, culture, or event). I mean “mourning” precisely in the sense of Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*: mourning is what Freud thought was the correct psychic process, in which we let go of the lost love-object and get over it. Perhaps historicism is an attempt to get over those texts from the distant past, to remove their surprising, anxiety-producing, traumatic connotations in favor of something that affected people—once—in a time that is now passed. After all, historicism asks us to try to understand how a previous culture might have experienced, understood, and felt about an object.

To summarize briefly: historicism imagines that the text was once known by a past culture and thus can be explained by situating it within that previous culture.¹ It

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¹ When I speak about “historicism,” I am a little imprecise, partially because I feel that the average use of “historicism” is often imprecise. Furthermore, as many have noted, people often cited as New Historicism frequently rejected the label themselves, leaving New Historicism proper with little in the way of a truly agreed-upon methodology. Larry Scanlon notes that criticisms

3 University of Minnesota Press, 2002) or Amy Hollywood’s work.
imagines that such a text is unsurprising, because any surprises it might give us today result from our estrangement from it as modern readers unable to access the past fully. By rejecting grand narratives for localized knowledge and by rejecting alternate ways of knowing a text, historicism (in its most excessive forms) limits both how we might talk about a text and our ability to imagine how a text might remain startling to its cultural milieu. By recovering the past while insisting on its alterity, historicism is always in danger of “getting over” the past through rendering it safe and unsurprising. This is not Freud’s melancholia, where we never get over the text, and it never fails to trouble us. This is mourning, where the text can be made sense of and released. The past, historicism often insists, is dead and no longer with us.

In doing this, the fantasy of historicism is that we can understand the historical object in relation to the other

of New Historicism often fail to distinguish between it and the older forms of historicism (which increasingly are resurfacing and replacing the more theoretical style of New Historicism): Larry Scanlon, “Historicism: Six Theses,” postmedieval FORUM 1 (October 2011): http://postmedieval-forum.com/forums/forum-i-responses-to-paul-strohm/scanlon/. It is my suspicion that some criticisms of “historicism” often take the form of claims very similar to those that might be forwarded by New Historicists. For instance, in a retrospective essay about New Historicism, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt comment that “[the New Historicist notion of a distinct, local culture as a text] carries that core hermeneutic presumption that one can occupy a position from which one can discover meanings that those who left traces of themselves could not have articulated”: Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt. Practicing New Historicism. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 8. Aranye Fradenburg, arguing against historicist methodologies, suggests that instead, “We cannot confine the work of knowing the Middle Ages to replicating, however hopelessly and/or heroically, medieval cultures’ self-understandings” (L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, Sacrifice Your Love, 77). Both arguments—for a methodology that produces knowledge that the culture did not have—are suggestive of possible similarities despite remaining ranged on either side of the psychoanalysis/historicism debate.
coordinates of the historical moment, which are always already known. The object is always unsurprising. As Larry Scanlon argues, historicism places itself in the bind of imagining that the historical object must always be within the range of the possibilities of the cultural moment. In his words, this “implicitly declares that the author or text in question has nothing to teach us.” This can even lead to the assumption that the text had nothing to teach its historical moment. Moreover, historicism implies that context determines text completely. Like biographical criticism, historicism suggests that all aspects of the text can be explained through recourse to a master text, whether that master text is the author or the surrounding culture. Some suggest that non-historicist practices flatten out historical difference between the Middle Ages and the present by imagining continuity between past and present. However, historicism is not historical enough. Through its fantasy of a safely knowable, self-contained past, historicism is often in danger of flattening out historical difference within the Middle Ages itself: as Scanlon notes, it makes “medieval culture all center with no margin.”

The fantasy of historicism is a fantasy that one can in fact know the object. Both Slavoj Žižek and Joan Copjec argue that historicizing serves to pass over or foreclose the traumatic Real of a particular moment, what Žižek calls the fundamental social antagonism or what Copjec calls the anxiety of the overproximity of the Real. Certainly, untheorized historicism often serves the precise function of placing the historical object at a remove from

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4 Larry Scanlon, “Historicism: Six Theses.”
5 Larry Scanlon, “Historicism: Six Theses.”
6 Copjec, Read My Desire, particularly her chapter “Vampires, Breast-feeding, and Anxiety.” Žižek has made versions of this argument (between psychoanalysis and historicism, psychoanalysis and constructivism, and psychoanalysis and contingency) in many publications. His collaborative volume with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau is a useful start: Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left (New York: Verso, 2000).
us, of protecting from its becoming uncomfortably close to our moment. We fantasize that we have the capacity to understand the culture that produced the object, and we often yearn to see the object as ‘representative’ of its time—even as representative of the “medieval mind”—and as always at a historical distance, enclosed in its own historical episteme: the worldview shifts so completely from period to period that continuity does not exist. The society of torture and punishment and public spectacle that Foucault has seen as so characteristic of the Middle Ages seems wholly alien from the panoptic society of prisons and disciplines that arose shortly after it. The coordinates of truth and knowledge appear to have shifted entirely. Thus, from the historicist’s point of view, no object from this other era could possibly have historical weight for us in the contemporary era. The moats of epistemic shift prevent it.

This is, of course, an extreme view of historicism, but it is a fantasy that nonetheless remains potent for many fields of medieval criticism, such as identity studies. A lack of historical continuity allows historicists to object that considering race, gender, or sexuality in the Middle Ages is an anachronistic imposition of a modern view on a medieval text.

This practice of explaining the historical object and of distancing it from ourselves functions as an analogue to Freud’s idea of mourning. We might feel in this interest a desire to always postpone the moment when we consider how we might understand the object, or how we do, or how we will, or how we may never. All of these feelings, I suggest, are foreclosed and held at bay by the mourning of historicism for this object, a mourning that allows (in fact requires) that the object be let go and consigned to a knowable past.

If the issues I have sketched out are indeed valid problems with historicism, then how might we let go of historicism as a practice? Should we let go of historicism

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and work to get over it? We might refuse to get over the historical object, by refusing to mourn it and leave it for dead in the distant past. We might refuse the fantasy of a text whose range of meanings is exhausted by its historical context and that is always unsurprising. *The Canterbury Tales* remain surprising despite knowing their cultural and historical context. Perhaps they are even sometimes surprising *because* I know that context. This refusal to mourn is a refusal not to be surprised or moved or indebted. As Sara Ahmed has commented in her work on queer grief, “to preserve an attachment is not to make an external other internal, *but to keep one’s impressions alive*, as aspects of one’s self that are both oneself and more than oneself, as a sign of one’s debt to others.”

I follow theorists like Copjec in imagining that giving up (or reining in) historicism’s excesses does not mean refusing historicity. By delivering the text over to a certain unknowability, by allowing it to retain its powerful, dramatic, surprising presence, one allows it to exist as a rupture or change in the period around it, as a series of brackets containing something that may be new or old or both or neither. Nevertheless, we need not imagine that historicism must be let go entirely. Perhaps as scholars we ought simply to inhabit the tension between present readings (possibly just allowing themselves to be surprised by texts) and historicist foreclosures of meaning (which attend to cultural context). We must imagine a historicity that need not let go of—nor mourn—history and its objects.

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