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 circle drawn, the authors step inside, seeking safety from the spirits. They are skeptical about this whole conjuration business, however, and fearful, too, of the boredom that comes with not being possessed. So they tarry over their books.

**AM:** “Settle thy studies, Faustus, and begin / To sound the depths of that thou wilt profess.”¹ Thinking about what to do next we are liable to be haunted by past efforts, perhaps by a diabolical presence such as this German *magus*, mocking any attempts to enumerate all we’ve tried and to propose some new and occult mode of inquiry. As if suc-

cessive attempts to do more, or better, with less would be sufficiently original (“Foucault farewell! Where is Harman?”). Should we always be in pursuit of The Next Big Thing? Perhaps the first thing to consider is the risk that in seeking to gain divinity, we will lack all ambition to invent other futures. “Lines, circles, schemes, letters, and characters! / Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires. O what a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honour, of omnipotence / Is promised the studious artisan!” But is that what we really want now?

**WS** [furrowing his brow]: You asked if I wanted to conjure devils. Now it seems you really brought me out here to talk about the future of the humanities. **[WS puts down the book he is reading, Amanda Cross’s Death in a Tenured Position.]**

Let’s at least be clear about etymology if we’re going to worry about the future, however wicked. There’s no way to be original, to pursue “Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme,” without returning to origins. The future of the humanities must be ancient. As we try to conjure new devils, then, let’s not banish the old ones; they are our friends. It’s those lines, circles, schemes, letters and characters we use to conjure them that have created mundane obstacles, so-called greater practical tasks, standing like a wide STEM in the way of a new future. Let’s not hesitate to incant old names.

**[AM starts rifling through the bag of books.]**

**WS:** See if you can find my dearest Milton in there. No stranger to demons and known to party with Satan, Milton thought that future of the human—of the humanities—looked bleak, which is why he sat down and wrote poems.

**AM** [still rummaging and stopping to admire another volume]: Long before Milton, you know, the humanities were considered, in more than one sense, trivial. I know we tend to speak of the modern corporate university, but even in his day John of Salisbury defended the humanities against contemporary entrepreneurial types who rejected

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2 Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*, 1.51–55.

the arts in favor of professional training that would produce personal wealth.\(^4\) I fear there has always been a “crisis” in the humanities, that an originary \textit{krisis} is somehow inherent to them; the sooner we accept our critical condition, the better. What we are doing is at least always emergent and at a decision point. Yes, yes, let the future be ancient. Shakespeare was wrong, I think. The past is not prologue; the past is an invention that calls for new creations.

**WS:** We must talk some time about your assumption that Shakespeare possesses Prospero’s voice. But later. John of Salisbury, Shakespeare, Milton do take us back, [\textit{WS becomes distracted by other memories}.] If only \textit{Back to the Future} were about a mad poet instead of a mad scientist! I think that movie actually introduced me to time travel—to thinking about history as something other than a straightforward, irreversible line. [\textit{WS begins to trace the outline of the USS Enterprise NCC 1701-A on the ground}.] I usually give \textit{Star Trek: The Next Generation} the credit, what with its late twentieth-century view of the twenty-fourth century. But really I forget where I first learned to think about the possibilities and types of time travel. And about forgetting as one mode of time travel—one central to the humanities, as Milton himself shows us in a poem driven at once by his inability to remember a time before and his determination to invent it through art.

**AM:** Your darling Milton and Shakespeare! How immodest, after all, was Milton’s rejection of the “middle flight” of those who demand less of literary studies, his determination “to soar / Above th’ \textit{Aonian Mount}”?\(^5\) One might almost be forgiven for thinking Milton had forgotten himself, daring to fly above the abode of the muses. He could hardly avoid the fates of Icarus and Phaeton—or of Satan. Aim that high and you end up in the nether regions!

[\textit{AM pauses, reconsiders}.]

But, to be fair, Milton understood the perils well, and so knowingly recollects Dante, Boccaccio, Ariosto, who al-


ready promised “things unattempted.” The poet’s bold, modernizing move is at once an epic medievalism, and situates text and reader within a postlapsarian genealogy. His boundless satanic ambitions help redraw the original dilemma for the humanities, in some weird way. His verses express other measures, quite apart from reigning administrative metrics and progress narratives. But what apparition is this?

[Music sounds, and the ghost of the poet passes over the stage]

WS: Tiresias reincarnate! How did we manage this conjuration? By what art? [Exeunt the ghost.] And where is he going? Back to his father’s house—again, as after university—because he isn’t through reading? [WS falls to his knees, extends his hands upward.] Oh honor the ghost who reminds us to honor forgetting! To keep reading! [WS’s hands fall. He has remembered something.] That reminds me: have we forgotten how we learned to read? John Locke forgot, and argued that children learning to read must be tricked: play a dice-game, he suggests, in which each face bears a letter. When the game is long forgotten, the knowledge of letters will remain. Rousseau mocks Locke’s idea, and teaches Émile to read by writing him a note containing details of an outing; Émile will not be able to attend the outing unless he can make sense of what it says. But Rousseau confesses that he too has forgotten how he learned to read. Furthermore, Locke and Rousseau say these things in books I’ve forgotten I’ve read! How then do those of us who teach reading—whether at basic or more advanced, critical levels—quantify, measure, and value forgetting? How much time does one need to forget

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before one realizes what one learns? How do we defend forgetting as fundamental to the experience of a humanities education?

AM [tossing Milton forgetfully back in the bag, digging now for Chaucer]: I am tempted to state within this circle, in this séance, that it is by forgetting ourselves in study that we are educated: educare, drawn or led out into other spaces and times, to strange new lives and new worlds. Language acquisition requires a sort of becoming-oblivious in order to be literate, orienting ourselves, by means of so many material supports, to regard others outside. And yet there is a lot to remember to properly lose oneself in the best possible way—an inventory is a condition of invention, someone said before. [He opens a book to read aloud]: “For out of olde feldes, as men seyth, // Cometh al this newe corn yer to yere, // And out of olde bokes, in good feyth, // Cometh al this newe science that men lere.”8 Here we return to the original notion of what we owe to old books. Yet someone must still work the field, from whence comes this “newe corn yer to yere,” which is what I dream our students are doing in essays, and exams and we engage in here. It is also, in another and less transactional mode, what makes learning so contingent.

WS: I agree, but given the prevailing administrative metrics, we humanities scholars are never really allowed to forget what we’re doing, and are scarcely permitted to say, when asked why we exist or what we’re producing, that we don’t know, or that we’re comfortable not knowing. The pedagogical question then becomes how best to plan and make space for all of these zombie-like creatures, these specters of Milton, Rousseau, Chaucer, even ourselves. The future of the humanities sits in our classrooms, but most students don’t understand their conjuring powers. [The opening lines of Whitney Houston’s “The Greatest Love of All” sound in WS’s head. The spirit of Lee Edelman retaliates with a deliberately off-key rendition of “Tomorrow.”] Most of us bemoan this ignorance, which is not necessarily their fault, and try to correct for it by building an elaborate scaffold of learning outcomes on our syllabi.

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But what if, instead, we harness this ignorance to the obliviousness necessary for literacy. An immodest, utopian proposal from within the safety of this circle: let us delete all course objectives from our syllabi—all things that seek in advance to tell the student what he or she will learn. The course title alone should suffice for the preview. If students ask what they will learn, reply that you do not know (because you don’t). If students seek a model for how they should learn, point them to Othello, a play about reading, only remove Act V so they don’t think your course will end tragically.

AM: Nor would it end tragically if Othello were a better reader, less violently certain of himself—perhaps, too, less susceptible to the devastating effects of his own racist, misogynistic imagination. The humanities should be a place for safe stumbling, a place to forget what we’re doing and to figure it out later; it should encouraged people to try on ideas that do not have a secure place in the world, or not yet. The humanities need a new kind of modal logic: necessarily, everything is contingent. And history needs new modes of transit, including long forgotten forms of transport, such as sojourning, wandering, veering, as we drift towards futures with which we are not yet affiliated.

WS [rifles through the pile of books they have now created]: First things first, though. Because we put together this syllabus that I’m guessing will simply say—“In this class, seek to soar above the Aonian mount. You must be comfortable with devils. Gardening experience desired but not required”—we’re going to need new texts. These are all marked up and torn. How do you even read them? They’re so old.

AM: But that’s the point! We are often unaware of what is archaic or contemporary anyway; the past is infinitely ramified in the present and future. Thinking about things simply as old does not capture this overlap. We need new metaphors. Where’s my copy of the conversation with Michel Serres? [WS hands it to him.] Here: “Consider a late-model car. It is a disparate aggregate of scientific and technical solutions dating from different periods. One can date it component by component: this part was invented...
at the turn of the century, another, ten years ago . . . . Not to mention that the wheel dates back to Neolithic times.”

I propose that we are more likely to get where we want, whether in our scholarship or in class, if we think of time as less a linear than a stochastic system—the “folded or crumpled time” in which we are all implicated.

Serres offers another apt metaphor for this time; in fact, one you will like more—the crumpled handkerchief. “Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed,” which were separated by distances when the handkerchief was set out flat. Pleated or torn, fixed points on a planar surface exhibit a new rapport. Folding up a map might produce a superior model for us to follow into the future.

WS: I see what you did there, you sly devil. For Othello, who fails miserably to read the handkerchief, can only conceive of the future as a “chaos” if he loses his present anchor, Desdemona. Othello can’t forget, like he needs to, the racist superstructure of his past and imagine a new future for himself and Desdemona. Poor illiterate demon Othello.

I think that if there’s a sentence amidst all this solas, it’s that we as humanities scholars cannot defer the future—imagining it as something we want but which we do not enact. If we are to break out of this mode that brings us again and again to the point of talking about what we would do, we have to imagine the future and bring it with us. We have to do what we are doing right here, right now.

AM [going meta]: In this circle? By means of this cento-like assemblage? I should say so. For what are we doing in this ensorcelled moment but stitching times and modes together? Creating another patchworked text. A scaffold for future being. There is much to remember in order to forget ourselves, doing what we do here, right now.

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