

The Impossible Research Archive

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RACHEL SAGNER BUURMA AND LAURA HEFFERNAN'S IMAGE OF THE 'TRUE, IMPOSSIBLE teaching archive' is an arresting and melancholic one. It is a reminder of how ephemeral our work can be, of how much is allowed to slip away without a second thought. In my response, however, I would like to focus on the implicit counterpart of the teaching archive—namely, the research archive. In contrast to the open-ended, indefinitely multiplying archive of syllabi, lecture notes, student papers, etc., the research archive is presumably a well-defined body of work, carefully preserved and officially registered with all relevant authorities: 'the literature'. The task of a research scholar is to 'engage' this literature, probing it for gaps and contradictions that can be progressively filled in. This vision of the scholarly task means that the research archive, in addition to being clearly defined and delimited in fact, is also in principle able to be completed. The telos of a fully saturated scholarly field that has exhausted all possible approaches to its object may never be factually achieved, but it provides a finite horizon. By contrast, the task of teaching will never be complete, and hence the teaching archive will never be finalised—much less reach a state of crystalline perfection and exhaustiveness.

This means that the research archive is 'possible' in a way that the teaching archive is not. At any given historical moment, it is complete and defined, and in principle it is able to be completed. Yet at this late date, it doubtless remains 'impossible' for all practical purposes—impossible for any one scholar to assimilate, much less

‘engage’, even in the most esoteric of specialisations. This is doubtless a different kind of ‘impossibility’, one that carries with it a very different affect. Where the impossibility of the complete teaching archive produces a kind of wistfulness and wonder—if only we could have seen and participated in all these lively, unpredictable classes!—the impossibility of the research archive produces a deadening guilt, a sense of insuperable, unending obligation.

Coming from the dissertation committee member, the peer reviewer, the tenure review board, the demand to ‘engage the literature’ represents an open-ended demand for labor. The point of this labor is not to improve one’s scholarly work. In fact, odds are that it will actually make it worse, festooning it with superfluous footnotes and inorganic digressions. (Surely we are all experts in detecting those odd, forced passages in which a scholar is satisfying the arbitrary demand of a peer reviewer.) Nor is the point to bring it up to some defined standard of sufficient ‘engagement’ with the literature. Everyone knows that ‘engaging’ all the literature is impossible, so that even the most Germanically thorough, monkishly isolated scholar is bound to fall short. Only those with research assistants and similar resources can even pretend to ‘engage’ all the relevant literature. Rather, the point is simple gate-keeping—or at best, a pious gesture toward the lofty ideal of true scholarly rigour.

With all due respect to true scholarly rigor, I would like to suggest that the goal of ‘engaging’ all the literature is not only impossible, but undesirable. Just as everyone knows that no scholar can truly master all the relevant literature, so too does everyone know that the most generative and influential work arises when scholars bracket current scholarly debates and return to the primary sources. By contrast, scholarship that grows out of the quest for gaps in the literature often becomes a recursive, self-enclosed game, in which the possibility that someone might learn anything of real interest takes a back seat to the internal politics of the scholarly guild.

What I have said so far may sound like the sour grapes of a scholar who lies awake at night nursing resentment at the infamous Review #2. Yet even editors and publishers recognise this problem. In a recent column in *Public Books*, Justin Steinberg—a prolific Dante scholar and editor of the prestigious journal *Dante Studies*—argues that excessive disciplinary specialisation is actually standing in the way of learning genuinely new things about the great Florentine poet. Lamenting that it has become ‘increasingly rare to find scholarly examinations of Dante’s texts by non-specialists’, he concedes that he can’t blame those outside the guild for being wary of attempting to publish on Dante: ‘If today I were to send the writings of Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, or Ernst Kantorowicz out for double-blind peer review, they would be rejected for failing to engage adequately with the

secondary criticism'.¹ This attitude shows why a generation of continual calls for more interdisciplinary work have gone largely unheeded, and truly interdisciplinary work largely unrewarded—the gatekeepers within each discipline demand that the interdisciplinary scholar master two impossible bodies of literature instead of just one.

Buurma and Heffernan highlight the many ways in which the separation of teaching and research has been disastrous for literary studies—and I would add, for all humanistic disciplines. Indeed, I am not convinced that any of the humanities disciplines are or should be considered 'disciplines' in the conventional sense at all. Instead, the various 'disciplines' are more like specialisations or, less loftily, areas of focus within the broad meta-discipline of the humanities. What we are accustomed to call interdisciplinarity actually comes first, in the practice of working with texts and text-like artifacts that can be read as belonging to a discursive tradition. Humanistic research does with those texts (broadly construed) all the things one can do with texts: reads them closely, connects them with other texts, contextualises the conditions of their production and reception.

These activities necessarily go together and necessarily transcend any 'disciplinary boundaries'. What is more, they closely echo all the classroom practices that Buurma and Heffernan so helpfully document—practices that, in a literary or humanistic setting, are necessarily geared toward helping students become better and more informed readers of their sources. That practice requires reading and using and arguing about scholarly literature, but not 'engaging' with it in the sense of reading and citing it for its own sake. What makes for good teaching is not full coverage of the literature, but focusing in on the literature that is most *discussable*, that will energise the students (positively or negatively) and get them thinking new thoughts (with or against it). It is not important whether or not a scholarly work is currently 'influential'. As Buurma and Heffernan remind us, 'literary value'—and I would add, scholarly value—'*seems* to emanate from texts, but is actually made by people. And classrooms are the core site where this collective making can be practiced and witnessed' (6). Including a work on the syllabus can never merely reflect 'influence'. It always necessarily reinforces and continues that 'influence'.

In other words, one is always curating. The claim to be merely 'covering' a field is just an alibi for curating poorly. This is as true in the classroom as it is in genuine humanities scholarship. As Eric Santner—a model of interdisciplinary scholarship in the humanities—once told a summer faculty seminar group, we don't owe our

¹ Justin Steinberg, 'Four Ways to Ruin Dante—and One to Save Him,' *Public Books* 16 June 2021, <<https://www.publicbooks.org/four-ways-to-ruin-dante-and-one-to-save-him/>>.

time to everyone who has ever written on our topic, but we do owe our acknowledgment to those who have truly influenced our thinking. This standard admittedly introduces an element of happenstance into the scholarly enterprise, but great scholarship is often the product of serendipity and it is dishonest to claim otherwise. One of my favorite scholarly anecdotes is when a scholar of T. S. Eliot's work happened to be snowed in at a German lodge with nothing to read but the salacious memoir of an aristocratic woman, which happened to echo some of the more enigmatic opening lines from *The Waste Land*. Eliot's ex-wife later clarified that he knew the woman personally and drew on their conversations rather than the memoir as such, but still, what a find—one that no scholarly methodology could possibly have produced! And that is the kind of thing that happens continually in the classroom, as students bring whole regions of cultural production (both 'high' and 'low') with them into the classroom and, simply because they are unique individuals with unique experiences and perspectives, notice details and connections in the course materials that the instructor never would have imagined.

Undoubtedly, the students will also independently rediscover ideas already discovered by others. Every year, for instance, my students painstakingly compare and contrast the story of Joseph as told by the Bible and the Qur'an and conclude that the Qur'an is aiming to clarify the tale's moral stakes. This discovery does happen to match up with what I consider to be the 'correct' interpretation, but more important is that it is generative. It gives them tools to approach the Qur'an's other 'revisions' of biblical narratives and find that, lo and behold, a similar intention appears to be at work, setting in relief those times (as in the story of the fall of the devil, named Iblis in the Qur'an) that something else is going on. In fact, I believe that interpretation of the Qur'an's Joseph story to be 'correct' largely *because* it has worked so well in the classroom. I apply a similar standard to scholarship. When I studied the work of Qur'an scholar Angelika Neuwirth, for instance, I appreciated her literary and chronological approach, which seems to render the Qur'an readable and teachable in a way that more abstruse scholarly theories—such as those that hypothesise a lost Syriac original on which Muhammad was drawing or postulate that the text was produced or redacted by an unknown group of scholars centuries after Muhammad's death—do not. Whether or not those later scholars are factually correct (I doubt it), Neuwirth's work is more useful, because it gives us a rewarding new way to approach the primary text.

It is no accident that each of Burma and Heffernan's chapters traces the genesis of a work of scholarship out of and alongside teaching. This occurs not simply because teaching also *requires* research, though they are right to observe, 'Professors read as much scholarship when constructing a new syllabus as when writing an article, and they are likely to read more widely and across more fields

and even disciplines when they read for teaching' (212). Rather, when teaching and research are not treated as hermetically separate processes, they naturally go together. Writing a good book or article is like putting together a good syllabus—which entails that truly good scholarship is *teachable, discussable* scholarship. This does not mean that it is necessarily 'popularised' in the sense of being pre-digested and 'accessible'. Accessibility can be an obstacle to learning, leaving the student with no more work to do. Difficult can be better, within reason. More lives have been changed by Judith Butler's notoriously difficult *Gender Trouble* than by a Malcolm Gladwell book picked up at the airport, although the latter is much more accessible.

We need to do more than simply 'value' teaching alongside research. We need to recognise that they are the same thing, part of the same process. This process starts with teaching and remains always *teaching-like*. Buurma and Heffernan are right to lament the ongoing failure of the humanities academy to reproduce itself as our work is increasingly politicised and starved of resources. Yet if we lost the supposedly rigorous disciplinary scholarship that 'engages' the literature as part of a self-enclosed and self-referential game, we would be losing very little. Doubtless a huge amount of valuable work has come out of that paradigm, but we have long since passed the point of diminishing and even negative returns. If research in the humanities is to survive—and be worthy of survival—it must become what the best and most generative work in our field already is: an extension of our teaching, with all the messiness and incompleteness and unpredictability that entails. The research archive must become 'impossible' not in the sense of imposing an unattainable telos of completion, but in the same way that the teaching archive is 'impossible'—because, like any living thing, it cannot be archived.

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