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Screen Time—Or, Awaiting the Worst, Remotely

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Abstract

A reflection on the author's experience with remote teaching and scholarship during the pandemic, and their implications for recent disciplinary formations within medieval studies.

For many, especially those traumatized by loss, dislocation, and sudden economic insecurity, the transition to online teaching and scholarship likely registered as one of this year's lesser disruptions. Yet an awareness of burdens far greater than one's own did not make it any easier to accept the jarring, counterintuitive experience of academic life carried out remotely, even if it was already clear on some level what to expect—or that it would bring our profession's ongoing contestations into sharper focus. Indeed, the inner contradictions of the academy have been vividly exposed during a year of dispersed, unequal labor, in which distinctions between tenured and untenured department members grew more entrenched, and the absence of organized, embodied faculty resistance gave university managers a pretext to cut entire academic departments under the guise of austerity. The corporate university consolidated its power, while our sense of the collective and the social—that other “corporate” university we inhabit and defend—eroded even further.

It was unnerving how rapidly the granite solidities of campus life fell away, leaving us with makeshift workspaces and shoddy Wi-Fi. Even our basic pedagogical lexicon was quickly rendered obsolete, supplanted by one so far outside my own experience that it left me wondering what kind of non-literal world I had entered, and whether my notions of academic work and community still made sense there. Crisis deforms language, making it difficult to perceive our fundamental affiliations from one moment to the next, or to endow individual experience with collective historical meaning. As I tried to comprehend the reality setting in during those early weeks of March 2020, I reminded myself that medievalists had confronted versions of these same uncertainties before, in different contexts. For Curtius and others writing at mid-century, the response to cultural disintegration was “a new completeness and coherence” in philological scholarship (7). Against the backdrop of wartime political fragmentation, philology invoked a unified European literary and historical tradition, stemming from the consolidation of premodern Latin culture and the reception of its “great artistic symbol[s],” in Troeltsch's words (quoted in Curtius 7). In the present, as medieval studies revisits its foundational logics of practice, including philology, “completeness and coherence” suggest less universalizing disciplinary formations, and an ideal of inclusion enabled to some extent by online collaboration. And yet the mimetic effects of ‘zoom lecturing’ were just convincing enough to make me even more acutely aware of what had been lost to isolation and solitude.

And as for my students? Uprooted from campus, their relationship to the university as an institution had become abstract, while their existing financial obligations—tuition, fees, even boarding—remained as concrete as ever, despite the economic hardships of global recession. The pandemic may have suspended commerce, but it did not suspend capital, or its attendant demands on the labor of our minds and bodies. In this and other ways, 2020 underscored the intensely destabilizing effects of our reliance on social media companies. The domestication of academic work enabled by such platforms elided certain boundaries, to be sure, but it also fundamentally reshaped everyday experience by subsuming the spaces and private consolations of our personal lives into our professional ones.

One can be grateful, as I am, and as I know my students are, for technology that allowed for the continuation of academic life in some communal form. Teaching online led me to appreciate how

thoroughly our discipline has embraced the democratizing potential of the open digital archive, and to think more systematically than before about using new media in coursework and pedagogy, irrespective of the pandemic. At the same time, perhaps owing to my own scholarly focus on book and manuscript production, I have often wondered during this long stretch of working remotely how to historicize our collective turn towards electronic representation. Last fall, I taught an online course entitled “21st Century Chaucer: Reading Medieval Manuscripts in the Digital Age.” I had not intended the course as a response to the vicissitudes of pandemic teaching in any overt way; the focus on digital textuality was an intrinsic part of how we sought to approach the cultural distance of premodern literary writing. Eventually, though, it became necessary to account for the immaterialities of online teaching within a larger history of the “material” itself. The high-resolution digital reproductions we studied in our weekly sessions highlighted the emblematic physicality of the manuscript book but also over time framed larger concerns about what it means when traces of the past disclose themselves to readers in new forms.

Changes in how we teach and communicate raise questions not only about our ideologies of form and textual presence, but also about the actual social conditions under which such ideologies come into focus or acquire authority. It is here, perhaps, that the classroom itself figures more prominently than we might have expected in our analysis of the baseline institutional circumstances for our scholarly sensibilities and practices. Perhaps this is just another way of saying that the formless, disembodied pedagogical “space” of digital instruction now exists in dialectical tension with its material equivalents—and will for some time, long after the current crisis ends. No matter how earnestly we may wish to return to our familiar seminar rooms and lecture halls, an era of desocialized labor like the one we are in can be equated all too readily with liberation from necessity and economic toil. It isn’t just that the pandemic has changed our experience of the public sphere, or made everything virtual; it’s that the sudden recontextualization of learning now competes with other material realities and how we experienced those realities before the pandemic. Perhaps this dialectic is the occasion for imagining a humanities pedagogy that redeems the actuality of our classrooms, our books, and our labor. The world beyond our screens can seem elusive and extravagant, hard to justify any longer in terms of its expense, needed personnel and infrastructure, and cost to the managerial bottom line: the liberal arts education as conspicuous consumption. Unfortunately, this is not a new story in US cultural life, but it is something we will need to confront even more forcefully as students return to campus and academic inquiry resumes in some sustainable fashion. Already at my own institution, the administration is realizing the salutary financial effects of replacing in-person teaching with online modalities, and has begun acting on plans to impose a permanent hybrid model; like similar arrangements now underway at many other colleges and universities, this one entails increased faculty workloads without increased compensation, while also rebranding the dispersed, atomized experience of online learning as educational “optionality.”

Although the collectivities that define our intellectual and material labor as scholars inhere in written artifacts, books also afford solace of a more personal kind, beyond the collective; this too must be something we preserve in trying to strike the proper balance between page and screen, the tangible and the technologically mediated. Let me close, then, by briefly invoking a literary *mise en scène* for our troubled historical moment. In Philip Roth’s 1993 novel *Operation Shylock*, the narrator, mysteriously detained while covering a trial in Jerusalem, finds himself confined for hours to a barren classroom,

awaiting his captors. Taking a book from his pocket, he reads while timorously passing the time. But no sooner does he immerse himself in this book than he abruptly recollects others—*Nostramo*; *The Bellarosa Connection*; a novel by Edith Wharton—inscribed by the memory of the traumatic circumstances under which they had once been read. “The book you clutch while awaiting the worst,” Roth writes, “is a book you may never be capable of summarizing coherently but whose clutching you never forget” (322).

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