"Trial is by What is Contrary": new directions for the Humanities PhD
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I start many of my presentations by saying that anything you can ask is more important than anything I can say. Because I am speaking today as one of the designated representatives from the non-academic world, presenting some unconventional views about academics, and am speaking from a workplace not necessarily familiar to all of you, that is a little less true than usual. But it is still mostly true, so I have written this talk for about 40 minutes, or a bit less, and hope to spend a good deal of time in questions and answers.

In *Areopagitica*, his 1664 defense of unlicensed printing, Milton addresses the wish to shield readers from words and arguments and images that might lead them astray, in which not printing bad material preserves otherwise virtuous minds from bad influences. Whether you believe that or not (spoiler alert: Milton didn't) he asks what is that kind of virtue even like? Here's what Milton thought: "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary."[1] Uncongenial ideas force readers to race for the prize for their own ideas, and readers benefit from the effort: "that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary."

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[1] John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1957), 728.

I have thought of Milton a lot recently, partly because a distinguished Miltonist trained me and I ignore her at my peril, but also because of our effort here today, re-thinking and reformulating the PhD to the benefit of the students, the institution, the academy, and the profession of humanities in the broader world, and our need to examine and perhaps embrace some of what is contrary. The initial impetus to bring the PhD under our collective microscope is that our students' outcomes are in some ways wanting: some students get academic jobs, but many do not. When, motivated by the reality of the job market, they express interest in seeking work outside academics, they report themselves generally unsupported in their attempts, often dismissed as unserious by the faculty training them, and mostly unprepared for engagement with the non-academic job market.

But much as the students' plight concerns me, and it does, I am every bit as concerned by what their plight suggests about humanities in the academy and humanities as a profession, by which I mean how the trained humanists manifest themselves and their disciplines in the context of the national workplace, including but not limited to the academy. If the students' job outcomes are the canaries in the coal mine, everyone in academics are collectively the miners. The students' outcomes have led us to look at how we are training the next generation, but we need to look at both the educational structure of which they are a part and the broader working environment.

Today I am going to discuss proposals for how we can change the humanities PhD, and the outcomes I hope for if we implement those changes. First, I am going to argue that we need to change our how we as humanists represent the humanities in the academy and in the world. Second, I am going to discuss how those changes in our collective representation can guide us to make concrete, practical, near-term changes to our students' degree courses. I began with Milton describing the value of engaging with contrary ideas because much of what I propose as practice will fall into that category of contrary. (For those unfamiliar with the field of seventeenth and eighteenth century British literature, I'll also note that Milton's time was followed by one of the great periods in the history of English satire,

just in case you hear echoes of Jonathan Swift and the rest of my doctoral training. You've been

warned.) But like Milton, I am also absolutely convinced that trial by what is contrary will make us

better.

First, then, to how we should represent the humanities in the academy and in the world, which

is where I believe what we are now doing is most seriously wrong: the humanities academy is all too

frequently failing to function as humanists, to walk its own talk. Two of the core claims the humanities

makes for itself are its powers of engagement and its integrative nature. I am quoting one of what the

December 2013 White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities tellingly describes as an

"enabling assumption": "the humanities foster dialogical capacities to analyze and understand the

products and actions of the human world (as opposed to the natural world)—ideas, the social and

political life of discursive practices, works of art and literature, political movements, and historical

events; the humanities develop a critical, historical, and case-based understanding of value that helps us

determine why we should undertake certain courses of action in preference to others and why we

should keep assaying the consequences of past events, formations, policies, and imaginings."[2]

If you believe this elegant statement as deeply as I do, you would think that Humanities PhD

training is not only extraordinarily useful in the non-academic workplace, where the products and

actions of the human mind are manifested in economic, cultural, social, and political exchange, you

would think it is obviously useful there, as I have found it over the course of the part of my career that I

have spent outside the academy. And you would think that if it is so obviously useful, the academy

would be glad when those students who cannot or do not remain in the academy take those skills

outside it, where they will use them and continue to provide examples of what the humanities bring to

our collective lives. And finally you would think that the academy in turn would spend part of its energy

reaching into the depth and liveliness of this world, and to those who practice in it, to enrich their own

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[2] "White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities," Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, McGill University, December 2013, 4.

study, or at the very least not penalize those who do. You would think so, and you would very often be wrong. What we often find instead is the behavior that results in our graduate students being unsupported as they try to find work outside academics: non-engagement with the non-academic work environment, suspicion of non-academics' attitudes toward academics, and often a deliberate self-distancing from the non-academic working world.

Some of the reasons why many members of the academy frequently behave this way are perfectly understandable. Advanced work in the humanities is time-consuming and intellectually demanding, as is training our replacements: teaching them to master our subjects, teach their own students, and engage the collaborative scholarly profession. It's time-consuming to master and teach our own disciplines, so when some of our students head to other professions, it is not surprising that we do not know much about how to help them be professionals in other ways and in other disciplines, because we don't have time to learn about them. Not only do we not know about all those other jobs out there, but our own self-presentation depends on leading from a perspective of knowledge and expertise, which of course we cannot do with all those other professions out there. And when we cannot do that, we often do not know how to proceed with helping our students take the knowledge and skill we have given them and use it elsewhere.

But some of why we do not engage with the broader world outside the academy is not simply a matter of not having world enough, and time. Some of it is a turning in on ourselves: we develop our own specialized languages, as every profession does, and are offended when ours is mocked. We are not financially rewarded to the degree some other professions are, so we make a virtue of what we do have: deep engagement with our own fields is not only a requirement of the training and professional growth but becomes in part its own reward. Because nobody else values it enough, we feel entitled to define our profession and own its contours, and we develop defensive responses when people outside academics ask "well, what do you do anyway?" And of course, it's not that every member of the

humanities academy behaves this way, but many too many do, so many that the caricature of this profession is creeping uncomfortably close to its daily reality. I am not talking about the exception that puts the rule to the test here; I am talking about behavior that is rapidly becoming normal, and also considered normal by people outside the academy, which is a separate but related problem.

When academics becomes both profession and reward, it isn't so surprising that in valuing our world so deeply, we both value the non-academic world less and feel justified in doing so. And so when some of our students enter non-academic professions, we not only do not know how to help them, we often do not value those professions enough to help them get help, or to praise the students for seeking work where they must. We consider their doing that a failure, and the students know it and feel it and bear the weight failure brings when it comes from their institutional models of success. Our students' outcomes tell us they need more help than they are getting to prepare for and enter the non-academic working world. When students who take their training to the non-academic workplace are treated as though they are not serious about the humanities, we are failing.

I want academic humanities to start walking the talk that its defenders and admirers, of whom I am one, use to praise it. I want the humanities to value what it does, but also to understand that the current political, social, cultural world is also valuable and worthy of engagement, as decades and centuries from now this period will be worthy of the same study we now bestow on other periods. I want the humanities to value how hard it is to engage with new social structures, new media, new sources of cultural authority, in the trust that where we are going is richer for the infusion of new material, new perspectives, and new languages. I want humanities academics to care not less about its own world but more about the broader world in which it resides. I want humanities academics to stop turning in on itself like a startled snail when it hears a sound it does not recognize, and to see that turning in as the imaginative and intellectual failure it is.

Remedying this core failure is required to make every one of the changes I am about to recommend in the rest of my time today. But a little perversely I am not making a call to *be* better humanists but to *do* better as humanists, so that we can be judged how much we believe in our own self-description by how closely in accordance with it that we act. So, then: if the humanities academy walked its own talk, what would happen? How would we change what we do, and what would we teach the next generation of professionals to do?

There is a great deal that we would not change. We would continue to value deep engagement with our subject matter and our teaching, and we would continue to train the next generation of academics. We would continue to congratulate our students when they joined the academy, and we would teach them what we know about staying intellectually alive in it over the course of our careers. I expect that roughly 90% of what individual faculty members do in terms of the time they spend on their work and with their students would not change at all. There will, however, be a good deal of discordance between the amount of change to an individual (small) and the amount of change to a program (possibly larger) and the amount of *perceived* change to a program (perceived as enormous).

Some things would indeed change. For one thing, we would want to know what our students are doing now – all of them, not just the ones who end up in academics – and we don't now know that. Seriously, people. The questions we cannot answer about our profession on a per-department, per-institution, and nationwide basis, with readily available, publicly reviewable data, are shockingly basic: "How many students who enter with MAs complete the PhD in 5 years? What statuses count as making progress toward the degree? How many get tenure-track academic jobs within two years of finishing their degrees, how many get temporary academic jobs, and how many get non-academic jobs, and in what fields? How many students are still in academics ten years after first entering a PhD program?" Accurate data is not a luxury: it is foundational.

This lack of data has bad consequences, and their name is legion. One of those bad consequences is that absence and ignorance of these data allow us to lie to ourselves. We all tell ourselves that we are doing well with stories such as "Remember So-and-so? He got a tenure-track job at McGill!" Those happy occurrences tend to live brightly in our minds, but it is important to put them in context: it matters if So-and-so was one of three, or one of seven, or one of fifteen that year, and it matters what happened to the others. And it matters if that hasn't happened again, or if it actually happens every year. Conversely, we need to acknowledge the percentage who never get academic work, and who are no longer in academics ten years after they begin their PhD programs. It's one thing for it to be one or two students; it's another to be 25% of entering students overall. Concrete data, with agreed-upon definitions applicable to all institutions, gathered and reviewed every year, mean we have to be honest about what our students are doing, and where.

We need to be honest not only with ourselves but with our students directly: the data need to be gathered and reviewed but also published every year, so everyone can make realistic, informed decisions about their progress through graduate school, the likelihood of academic employment, the reasonableness for making alternate plans when necessary, and how much effort to put into those plans. When we get concrete data about our students' outcomes, we need to use those data to change how we talk to them: we can no longer say "Oh, I know the job market is terrible, but you're so good, I am sure you'll get the job" without also saying something like this: "Even really great people doing great work aren't getting tenure-track academic jobs now. Last year this department placed X number in tenure-track jobs, and that was Y% of those who entered with their cohort. Z number got adjunct jobs or postdocs, and our data tell us that those positions lead to tenure-track jobs A% of the time." We can't control what our students hear when they say such things, but we can and must tell a more complete truth, no matter what they may hear or what we may want to say.

If we acknowledge how many students are not getting academic jobs, then it will lead us to add some elements to their training from the beginning. One of the odd aspects of academics is that while it is very hard to get an academic job, it is very easy to know what the path is to trying to get one: there are widely understood protocols for applying and interviewing. The reverse is true in the for-profit, non-profit, and public-sector world: jobs are much easier to find, but the map needs some explaining. That isn't difficult, and some reasonable preparation over the course of their degrees can do this, and by reasonable I mean something like three hours a semester (clock hours, not credit hours). One structural reform that can help a great deal is to make campus career centers' job assistance extend to graduate students. Historically career centers have placed undergraduates and departments have placed graduate students, but as the number of non-academic placements has grown, so has the number of students thereby left without job-seeking help. After five or six years of their work, including teaching for our institutions at low pay, we owe them an approach to placing them other than "nameless in dark oblivion let them dwell" (*Paradise Lost (PL) VI 380)*.

If we took our charge as humanists seriously, to engage with the broader world of human products, another thing that would change is the range of where we publish and the audiences for whom we write. I am quoting again from the white paper: "the[humanities] nurture the capacity to write and speak persuasively and informatively to different readerships and audiences." (5) If that is true, and if we care that it is true, the academy has a funny way of showing it. The Holy Grail in academics is still tenure, and the range of places where publication "counts" is still too narrow. I am not suggesting that we stop publishing in *The Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History*; I am suggesting that publication in online venues and popular media outlets also has its place. For graduate students starting PhD programs now, we should require that they write for parallel publication: every seminar paper and dissertation should have a brief parallel summary version written suitable for publishing the information and argument in a popular forum. And by brief, I mean 250-500 words. One of my concerns with the

2013 White Paper is that its changes are large – the academic python will have to digest the pig of change and will predictably resist. As nothing succeeds like success, and as small changes well executed will increase confidence in larger changes, I recommend creating more opportunities to digest mice.

Requiring this – and I do mean it as a hard requirement – means that there has to be a venue for it and there has to be a readership and forum for commentary. I want to suggest a model for doing this from my own experience. I grew up in Ithaca, New York, home to Cornell and its agricultural college. The college had an entity called the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, and part of it is called Research and Extension, whose mission was and is precisely extending the work of the agriculture college. The audience was and is people who are in agricultural for a living, which of course encompasses many and varied jobs. The site has a list of publications. As websites go, this isn't hard or expensive to launch and maintain, and a comment forum is an easy way to invite commentary from readers outside the academy. The first people I'd invite would be graduates of Alberta's PhD programs who are now in other fields.

A second model concerns my father's work as a research veterinary pathologist at Cornell. For a small fee, any veterinarian in New York State could send in a case, and the pathologists examined it on a rotating on-call basis. It is perfectly possible to imagine similar questions from, let us say, high school teachers coming into graduate students for discussion in a seminar and one-paragraph answers being posted for everyone to read. These two examples aren't perfect parallels to what goes on in academics, but they are instructive joinings of academics and the broader workplace.

Requiring a parallel summary version for the popular press, whether it were ever published there or not, would have several beneficial outcomes. Graduate students and faculty would be encouraged to remember that audiences other than academic ones also consume sophisticated, demanding information. The students would learn the discipline of writing short pieces for non-specialized audiences, which both academic and non-academic careers require much more often than

long ones for specialists (think: course descriptions, grant applications, conference proposals). Students would develop a portfolio of short pieces useful to them in the event that they decide to seek non-academic work, and if we start counting those who do, we will know what number will benefit from this exercise.

Finally, graduate student prose would improve. I want to explain my thinking about this last, perhaps counterintuitive point. Graduate students model their prose, as every other aspect of their work and careers, on what they see rewarded, and what is rewarded in academics is the prose that gets published in professional journals on the way to tenure, and I don't suppose I need to tell you what so much of that prose is like. From where I now sit, the claim about the humanities fostering skill in writing and in addressing varied audiences appears mostly not to matter to the academic structures widely admitted to count within academics. To the non-academic world, the prose rewarded in the academy appears entirely self-absorbed and self-addressing. Whatever we say the humanities teach about writing, we are not writing that way ourselves when it matters most to our internal advancement. That is actually fine, as we of course need to speak as specialists to other specialists, but we also need to cultivate and reward more public-facing prose, where outreach is a virtue. And if we do that, the graduate students will learn the different standards of those audiences, which they may need in non-academic careers someday and which, as I have argued, they actually will need within academics far more frequently than we normally acknowledge.

The story we tell ourselves about the writing and explication skills the humanities teach is remarkably similar to the story we tell ourselves about the humanities and how it engages with the world. If we walked the talk about humanities engaging the broad world, we'd be glad when our students enter the non-academic workforce, but when we don't help them enter it and make them feel bad when they turn there, we don't act as though we value it. If we walked the talk about the humanities teaching written engagement with varied audiences, we would reward it and teach them

how to do it, but we mostly don't do it, and, significantly, we mostly don't reward it within the academy. So let's start.

A further change concerns the dissertation. We need to change the pattern of scholarship from graduate dissertation as monograph-length work that becomes a book for an assistant professor's tenure to a shorter work that becomes monograph length for the tenure book. Let us continue to have monograph-length scholarly work, but from scholars who are engaging with the academy on a continuous professional basis, and who have more time to mature toward that work, rather than being required to produce it as a graduate student.

Here is the reasoning behind this change. When most graduate students were assured of tenure-track academic work, the pattern of a monograph-length dissertation that became a book for tenure made some sense. A good deal of work was done in graduate school, with its relative freedom from other academic responsibilities, such as extensive committee work and student supervision. And then assistant professors had both not only a good foundation for their book but also more time to allow some of that work to mature. But now that many more students are not finding work in academics at all, and many are entering as adjuncts without time for research, some staying in that status throughout their time as academics, many fewer of those monograph-length dissertations will be given the time and attention and resources they need to become books. We're asking too many students to spend too much time on too many dissertations that are not going to become the advanced scholarly works they were once destined to be.

An additional disadvantage is that monograph-length dissertations are keeping students in graduate school for too long; five years after the master's degree is plenty, and four years is better. We are keeping people out of the workplace doing relatively isolated work for too long, when their peers in other fields are developing careers. The decade between ages 25 and 35 is perhaps the single most critical one for growth and professional development, and too much of it is being spent on dissertations

from people who will not remain in academics, or in academics but not conducting research and publishing. We are taking too much from too many students and employing too few of them to justify that: we need to get them to do a solid piece of scholarship and then allow those who will not remain in academics to go on their way sooner than we now do.

We can also help dissertation writers more than we do, with some basic project-management skills as part of the ongoing training we give graduate students; this is part of the three hours a semester I referred to earlier. The third year is a critical time for graduate students, because they are finished with relatively time-constrained and defined projects (seminars and their papers, exams) and are heading out to the relatively more uncharted land of the dissertation. But having just finished exams and now facing the Great White Whale of the dissertation, they get too little practical guidance on how to define, scope, manage, and finish such a large project. It's like the old joke: how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. You set the date when you want to finish, you work backward, and you divide your work up into one-week segments.

One reason students get too little pragmatic guidance on how to get through the dissertation is that this kind of skill is not one that every academic has. And these kinds of skills tend to fall into that dreadful self-defeating cycle of not having it, so we don't value it, so we don't engage with people who have it and value it that I discussed earlier about financial rewards. Another reason falls into the nastier area of academic class structure, where some kinds of knowledge are more valuable than others, and some kinds of knowledge actually make people's capabilities suspect. At many research universities, this kind of practical guidance is associated with so-called support functions, whether those are IT or otherwise administrative. So proposals to make some of this training available to grad students are often met with raised faculty eyebrows, comments about that not having been needed or available in my day, or open speculation about what good it would do. As a veteran of many projects, of which the dissertation was one, I can tell you exactly what good it would do: it would help students get done faster

and more predictably for them, and if they needed to enter the non-academic workforce they would have the start of another skill.

In addition to developing basic project management skills for the dissertation schedule, directors of graduate studies should require graduate students and their advisors to check in with each other no less than every two months, to discuss (however briefly) progress in the dissertation, whether by email or in person.   Faculty members have an understandable tendency to vanish when they get long periods of time without teaching or committee responsibilities. Graduate students are not always ready to be left alone intellectually for quite that length of time, and they need to check in with either the DGS or their dissertation director. The comment I sometimes hear from faculty is "well, if they can't work on their own for four months they're obviously not suited to academics." To this I would say that graduate students are still relatively new to this business, and should get a little more guidance than that. Exchanging email no less than every two months isn't unduly burdensome. This will require setting expectations in a document published to both graduate students and faculty, describing what each should expect of the other.

We need to require digital humanities training for every discipline as a standard part of the degree. Lack of these skills is not only keeping our students from engaging with the most common expectations, tools, and capabilities of workplaces, it is keeping those of us outside academics from getting the benefits of those tools and capabilities applied to a vast body of visual and written art, history, and literature. This isn't optional or just a specialized an interest anymore; it isn't even where learning to use a computer was twenty years ago; this digital revolution is as important as libraries. The program at the University of Victoria is an excellent example of the kinds of skills all humanities graduate students need to acquire. Not all graduate students need all those skills, but every graduate student needs at least some of them and familiarity with the rest. This can't be left to students to ferret out on their own, or to learn only at the shallow end of the food trough, by which I mean a Twitter

stream. They need Twitter, but they also need to understand archival digitization, data compression for storage, and the importance of search indices.

Finally, I want to say a word about how all this can be structurally implemented, and this is a comment specific to Canadian universities. In this country the graduate student union is a significant structural feature, and its members have, not surprisingly, shown themselves to be receptive to many changes to PhD programs, including but by no means limited to better preparation for non-academic work. From a departmental perspective, the key person is who in US universities is generally called the director of graduate studies or DGS, by whom I mean the faculty member in charge of graduate students. From an institutional perspective, it is either the dean or whichever associate dean of the graduate school is charged with leading graduate education (rather than the functioning of the organism as a whole). These three centers of interest have to work together: the graduate student union, the departmental directors of graduate studies, and the relevant dean or associate dean. If they work well together the kinds of changes I am discussing can be made at an institutional level. They all need the same data that is comparable across departments and institutions, the same understanding of what counts as progress and skill development through the degree, and the same understanding of the pathway through the dissertation. And the three groups need to trust each other. The core of institutional success for these programs is the individual department; the core of the department's success is a strong DGS.

If we who are fully trained, senior humanists start walking the talk of the humanities, we will start to value other humanists more, not just those who do what senior humanists have always done. If we believe they count, we will count them. We will spend time and money and the trouble of engaging closely with other institutions to take and maintain our census, and we will acknowledge what the results means about the resources, human and economic, that we are using in our profession. And then, if we really believe in what the humanities bring to our collective lives, we will make sure our work

can be conveyed to more people, and we will teach students to write for and address them, and we will

be glad when we learn, and glad when they do it, and glad when they teach others. We will make sure

they learn to use digital tools, the library and printing press of our age; they will do it if we value it. If we

cannot as individuals give them the practical skills and help they need, we will see that they have access

to people who can. What we can give them is our time and supervision, and we will do that in a slightly

more structured, regular way, placing greater value on both their time and ours. We can get to a five-

year PhD with appropriately trained students, ready for academics if they can get work there and able to

go elsewhere if not.

We have to insist that the members of the humanities academy act like humanists, and model

that behavior to the next generation of professionals and to the rest of the workforce. That workforce

needs our skills, and we need theirs. How so many of us and them came to think and act otherwise is a

story for another day, but it can no longer be our framing narrative or the unconscious guide to our

actions. We have to do better, and we can.

Thank you.