

What Is Past Is Gone...What Is Past Lives On

Joseph Campana

Rice University

I teach because I live in expectation. Sometimes I even call it hope. I am always looking to be surprised by conversations I didn't know I would have. Anything can happen when people sit in a room, even a Zoom room, and bend their minds to the common task of talking about important things while also trying to understand one another. Those important things can seem quite small or loom impossibly large. They can be proximate or remote in space or in time. They gain import from a common endeavor—common not because of a unity of opinion or method but because of shared purpose. More than twenty years of teaching, a decade in graduate liberal studies, have taught me people still can, still *need* to talk about things that matter. Something as simple as a poem can be like a campfire. It beckons from afar, it warms when one is close, and it gathers up and makes a circle of the often otherwise oblique trajectories people take through the world.

Consider what most students in liberal studies do to have such conversations. They endeavor to know more than they do, to ask harder questions than most tend to ask, to take difficult classes, and to complete rigorous and engaged projects while working demanding jobs and living demanding lives. I am an avid teacher of my excellent and hard-working undergraduates and graduate students in the humanities at Rice, particularly in my home department of English, where I teach as a scholar of Renaissance literature and as a poet, and in the Environmental Studies program I now direct where I teach students from across the university

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about what the humanities, arts, architecture, and interpretive social sciences bring to pressing planetary concerns.

But something special happens in graduate liberal studies classrooms that I can describe but not entirely explain, which is part of the magic of surprise. What I know from this teaching is this: A hunger for dialogue, a zeal for learning, the respect for expertise, and the value of long, slow, hard conversations (across cultures and across centuries) have not been dimmed by the darkness of recent times. In fact, these things are more necessary because this moment demands and will continue to demand more than may seem possible. Solace comes from being present, with one another, whatever may come.

Surprising, too, are awards. It should never go without saying that awards are humbling and partial; humbling in that there are always fewer awards than worthy recipients. That is also why they are partial, which feels particularly true in this context because the glue that holds universities together is the generosity of teaching. Awards are partial in another sense as well. They are signatures of the work of the past but they serve best as indices of what is yet to come. So, my gratitude, to the AGLSP for this honor and to the Graduate Liberal Studies program at Rice University's Glasscock School of Continuing Studies for giving me a home this last decade, instructs me. So many conversations, so many surprises to come. That, too, is humbling.

If my task, here and now, is to say a few words, or a few more words, about teaching and learning, then my method must be to dwell on particulars, the best lessons coming from the conversations I have had of late. But these remarks also come from years of teaching, years that teach me two mutually contradictory truths, which somehow always seem to coincide—making me think they are, perhaps, the one and same statement:

What is past is gone: We live in its wake and can only recapture it in our minds, after the fact.

What is past lives on: It haunts and inspires the “now” as we look to unheralded futures.

This now for me of late, as it has been for many of you, is my fourth semester of teaching in a pandemic, in a time of deep division, in a time of environmental degradation. It is a time that tests teachers who sometimes seem like they are supposed to have

all the answers. Answers do not exist in this way, premade and waiting to be found. Answers arise in conversation once we learn to formulate difficult questions and gather the courage to ask them. The questions I have been grappling with arise from what I have, of late, been reading with my students in this time of plague. Here, then, are some teaching moments, which is another way of saying here are some fires by which I have tried to warm myself in the isolating cold of the pandemic.

What Is Past Is Gone

This fall I have been reading with students Judith Schalansky's 2018 *An Inventory of Losses* in a relatively new introductory course for our Masters of Liberal Studies which I co-teach. *An Inventory of Losses* is an extraordinary document of disappearances, twelve in this case, which range from islands to films to love songs to creatures to palaces. Is it not compelling, the idea that although every age may be an age of loss this is particularly an age of accelerating departures? Ecological losses accumulate at terrifying rate, whether one thinks of species or glaciers or coast lines. The loss of ideals, the loss of languages, the loss of the iconic figures, the decline of political systems, the decay of infrastructures, and the disappearance of a sense of shared purpose. To read Schalansky might be to court despair about the future. "Fundamentally," she argues, "every item is already waste, every building already a ruin, and all creation nothing but destruction, and the same is true of the work of all those disciplines and institutions that claim to be preserving the legacy of humanity."¹ So much for the liberal arts! It might seem that these fields leave us no more than scourers and hoarders, the sweepers of the dust from a planetary tomb.

And yet, Schalansky creates an extraordinary paradox in her inventories, which really serve as imaginative reconstructions, as when considerations of the extinction of the Caspian Tiger lead her to recreate a battle in the ancient Roman Coliseum or of the fragments of a film by F.W. Murnau which provoke a contemplation of the late days of Greta Garbo. The loves of Sappho, the island of Tuanaki, the Von Behr Palace: All occasions of loss initiate a renewal of memory as the past incites new creation. If at times *An Inventory of Losses* might seem clinical, it is

¹ Judith Schalansky, *An Inventory of Losses*, trans. Jackie Smith (New York: New Directions, 2020), 16.

because its considerable attention is trained on observing, often dispassionately, what loss *makes*.

Schalansky teaches that the omnipresence of loss provokes more than just rage, despair, or collapse. This lesson feels particularly important to me just at this moment in time, not only because it is tempting to take an elegiac or an apocalyptic stance toward the now but also because the fields often grouped under the rubric of the liberal arts or the liberal studies hold critical perspectives for the future—not because of some unbroken, unambiguous, or unimpeachable tradition but because problems, like questions, have long histories that merit hearing. And what remains, as splinters floating in a great sea of loss, offers resources for creating out of the ruins of time. Schalansky might be right to say that “in the end, all that remains is simply whatever is left.”² But the question is really what can be made of losses, staggering as they may be? The answer lies in what we choose to remember and what we choose to build together, imagination being the most rigorous, not the most escapist, of human faculties. The proof of this I find, too, in my students who imagined the losses they would inventory from telephone booths and 35-mm film projection to Elvis Presley or a little corner of New York City. Remembering can ritualize a loss but it can also be a form of restoration, which is why what is past *is* gone while what is past insistently lives on in those who literally re-collect the past.

What Is Past Lives On

The first summer of the pandemic I taught a course that never fails me, *Heaven and Hell: From Dante to Milton and Beyond*. The premise is simple: Long poems are best read together. More so, encyclopedic poems—literally, universe-building poems—afford conversations about nearly any subject including how later artists return to these works and build new things out of them. I first read Dante’s *Inferno* when I was a teenager, one cooped-up summer in my hometown in upstate NY. By day, I longed for time to begin again, which for me meant the school year. By night, and rather late at night, I read the cantos with a flashlight in my room. Every time I read or teach *Inferno*, I feel like I’m getting away with something. I’d like to think everyone else does as well. It’s impossible to read *Inferno* without being drawn in—even as the

² *Ibid.*, 15.

horrors Dante conjures test our wills (and sometimes our stomachs). Dante, too, cannot help but fall in love with the aversive underworld he creates, which is why he has such love for some of its residents (those he has, himself, consigned to hell). Readers are drawn into the construction of a system of judgment that offers up countless contradictions. The first impulse is to judge Dante—how could he say this or believe that or put this person in hell? The second is to begin, consciously or not, to assiduously construct one's own conception of hell. How easy to imagine, "I would get it right this time—I would be more fair, more just, less hateful." Dare to dream. It is for this reason that the final assignment for the course is to redesign *The Inferno* and, in so doing, face for oneself the difficulty of constructing a just system.

Of course, we were all reading these poems amidst different crises of justice in a summer paralyzed by pandemic and rocked by the murder of George Floyd. Our conversations were not attempts to escapes the rigors of that moment—far from it. Nor was our practice to apply Dante or Milton to the 21st century (or vice versa). Of what use are the ambivalent inheritances of the past in such times as these? What we have tended to call canons or traditions are compact systems of judgment that, like Dante's *Inferno*, should incite not just admiration or fascination but also suspicion. That they often have not invited suspicion explains why many still question, with renewed vigor, the canon controversies of recent decades with the added dimension of a referendum on the extent to which fields like Classics or Medieval Studies or Renaissance studies or the study of iconic figures like Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, participate in the worst of such systems. Sometimes they do. The real question is what, now, to do?

My experiences in the classroom teach me that the measure of important works is not a status designated by anonymous committees of wizened men but rather is the result of sustained engagement, sometimes over centuries. These works become parts of systems they were never designed for, systems we often need to change or scrap as time and tide require. But even amidst such often aversive circumstances, some books, some images, some ideas become the wells to which so many turn and return, year after year, to sustain themselves. The debate about canons and classics and traditions has been raging for millennia. It arises with renewed vigor now, and it will not be going away any time soon. The questions worth asking concern which cultural goods are still worth thinking about and thinking with, no matter how distant in

space, time, culture and no matter how different in core assumptions and values. And, how can we increase the range and variety of the cultural goods to which we attend, cultural goods drawn from a world of wonders and but also depravities? In some ways, arguing about this is one of the most human things we do. I hope it never ends because that will more likely be a sign that no really cares, anymore, to pay attention.

Are the ambivalent inheritances of the past of any use in such times as these? They are indeed, and here is one example of the extraordinary transfers that happen across time and culture. Dante set his *Divine Comedy* in Easter Week of the year 1300, although he finished it some 15 or so years later. To say the poem—the *Inferno* at least—took the world by storm is more than clear from eight centuries of controversy, conversation, and artistic adaptations and recreations. This is a work that still lives and with which many still think. In 1958, Robert Rauschenberg began his *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno*,³ a project for which he was rejected by the Guggenheim Foundation that same year, and which he first exhibited in 1960. These “illustrations,” as he called them, were magnetic—quite a success although the reviews are mixed. Some critics think of the choice as a canny way of advancing his career by anchoring his hitherto semi-dismissed dandyish DaDa-ism in the authority and seriousness of “the canon.”

Many still wonder: why Dante? Two of my favorite comments on Rauschenberg's choice of subject come from the composer John Cage in a fascinating and not surprisingly disjunctive essay. “Dante,” he says, “is an incentive, providing multiplicity, as useful as a chicken or an old shirt,” reminding us that a chicken and an old shirt are the discards of New York City streets likely to appear not depicted in but literally on a Rauschenberg canvas. Cage referred to this as a “poetry of infinite possibilities.” I remain interested in earlier histories of literature because they are incentives, sources of mystery. I prefer to think not of a sanctified canon but of an archive of possibilities, a junkyard of works often bizarrely but extensively and iconically distributed in time and space. I was a champion thrifter as a student, and I still love to rummage. More instructive is this: We all make choices. Our

³ Robert Rauschenberg, *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2017).

choices open some doors, close others, and in the process reveal so much about us.

Later, Rauschenberg would approach Dante more topically when *Life* magazine invited him to create something for the 700th anniversary of Dante's birth. That something was a collage of signature magazine images including images of war, violence, toxicity, and the protest marches of white supremacists and Neo-Nazis who didn't storm the Capitol but they did flood the streets, storm troopers of the white supremacist governor of Alabama George Wallace, infamous for intoning at his inauguration "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." That, Rauschenberg knew, was, as the title of the work indicated, "a modern hell."

Fast forward, now, to 2017 when Robert Rauschenberg's *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno* was republished by the Museum of Modern Art as a catalogue featuring the artworks and accompanying poems by Kevin Young and Robin Coste Lewis. Both offer scintillating lyrics, Young's anchored in but adapting the original *terza rima* lines to distilled tercets and Robin Coste Lewis working on the other end of the spectrum from her magnificent *Voyage of the Sable Venus*. That award-winning debut builds from the accumulation of the past, the title poem crafted out of millennia of titles of works of art that feature or refer to black women. If the task of *Voyage* is to restore and reanimate history, then these Dante poems work through obscuration and erasure, selecting and shaping from John Ciardi's 1954 translation of *The Inferno*. It's amazing that a technique called "erasure" can sustain living histories that haunt and instruct, which is precisely what my students found when they erased and re-translated the *Inferno* with their questions, their urgencies, and their experiences in mind.

May works like these spur conversation and creation for eight centuries more as past possibilities help to see and build futures. But may it also be the case that the weight of the past never stifles the now or the new. Figures and works such as these animate liberal studies at its best because they belong to anyone who wants to take them up. And they teach us that even as things fade—poems and people and palaces and creatures and even islands—we can still retain the past, glorious and grim, without being limited by it. That, indeed, gives me hope.