

## **The Inescapability of Your Past**

By W.A. Pannapacker<sup>1</sup>

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Academe is sometimes regarded as a refuge from "real life," a place where one can leave the past behind and start afresh, perhaps after many years in another occupation. In casual conversations with non-academics, I sometimes hear people express their longing to give up a lucrative career as a lawyer or a sales rep to earn a doctorate and adopt a new, relatively stress-free life as a professor at some friendly little college like — I don't know — Swarthmore.

We professors, of course, feel slighted by the perception that a prestigious academic position is some kind of refuge from the rigors of the marketplace. We know how hard it is to find academic jobs, much less good ones, and, more to the point, we know our jobs can be incredibly stressful. The reason, it seems to me, is not the workload of teaching, research, and service, which is generally under 50 hours per week for most of us. It is because we are engaged, primarily, in a lifelong project of reputation management, and reputations can be badly damaged by relatively trivial mistakes.

The memory of the academy is long, and its scope is national. Disagreements of no real consequence are remembered for entire careers, mutating and multiplying among allies and advisees into a kind of poisonous gas that can sour the air of an entire sector of the profession for generations. When I was in graduate school at Harvard in the 1990s, students were still embellishing their advisers' notable put-downs of older faculty members during the showdowns of the 60s. Meanwhile, in tiny seminars, the old professors repeated each other's notable put-downs of dons who had been dead for a generation or more. Your past is always with you in academe, and there's no way to get a fresh start when your wayward enthusiasms are preserved in print and in the oral cultures of institutions.

Trailing behind every academic is a chain of regrets — errors of judgment, clumsy articulations, accidental slights, small humiliations, minor negligence of our colleagues and students, and, more rarely, something worse: falsification of credentials or research data, vindictive reviews, the willful damaging of someone's career. But at the same time, we also make friends of our colleagues; selflessly serve our students; engage in countless small acts of generosity; deliver brilliant presentations; write beautifully, deeply, and courageously; and accumulate a treasury of good will that should enable us to compensate for our many missteps. Set alongside our good works, perhaps we can come to regard our sins, as Benjamin Franklin did, as mere "errata" to be corrected in a new and better edition of ourselves.

But somehow guilt and shame, the cumulative memory of so many small and painful events, loom much larger in our solitary reflections than does our satisfaction with the good we have done and the friends we have made. There are so many wrongs that cannot be amended, and anything short of perfection seems shameful in an occupation with such high ideals and standards of excellence. Good is not good enough. In the balance, we are always found wanting, and this sadness at our imperfection creates a desire to move on, to wipe the slate clean by commencing new relationships in a new institutional context, where we will avoid the mistakes that made our previous home seem so unwelcoming. In our gloomier seasons, the academic job market offers new hope: We can be born again.

With more experience we might recognize that, after several years in a new place, we will have forged a new chain of regrets and feel the need, yet again, to move on to something that can be perfect. But given the nature of our work — the magnification of small differences of interpretation into titanic struggles between good and evil — it is almost inevitable that we will make mistakes of fact and judgment in print that we can never erase, particularly when, as young academics, we are required to

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publish before we have completed our degrees. It is easy to become trapped by an experimental persona created in one's professional adolescence.

Many of us know the pain of finding an egregious typo in an article of which we were formerly proud. How much worse to discover that a search of your name on Google reveals dozens of blogs attacking your publications, perhaps one careless article that you wrote in an hour, desperate to meet a deadline, more than a decade ago in response to some heated controversy that now seems absurd? How much worse to find that your profile on RateMyProfessors includes disparaging, nearly libelous comments about your appearance, personal hygiene, and suspected beliefs?

Meanwhile, using cell phones, students can now surreptitiously record our lectures and private meetings; they can take photographs and movies of us — perhaps at the grocery store, unshaven, in our weekend clothes — and place these records on the Internet in all kinds of unforeseen contexts. Increasingly it is becoming impossible to know what is out there, hanging over us like some electronic sword of Damocles, waiting to drop when the professional stakes are highest.

You have to assume that everybody Googles everybody now. And everybody checks out everyone else's ratings on RateMyProfessors. It was nerve-racking back when a few of our mistakes were recorded in hard-to-find journals or in the oral tradition of one institution. It took some effort to get the goods on someone in those days. Now it seems we are all only a few clicks away from public humiliation and personal destruction. Everybody is probably ashamed of something, and it's waiting for you, like Banquo's ghost, at the next faculty meeting, conference presentation, or job interview.

Every academic search committee has members with competing agendas, and since there is no law against it individuals can now search for material on the Internet to damage candidates they do not support. So individual ratings on RateMyProfessors — read uncritically — can have a major impact on one's professional reputation, and many other questionable Internet sources can inform serious decisions about hiring and promotion, even though no one will admit it in any official forum. Academic job candidates, and probably candidates for any professional position, are less vulnerable when they have almost nothing in their Google portfolio, and that means we have to assume — from the time we start college, and maybe before then — that more of what we say and do has the potential to become a matter of permanent public record.

Like it or not, Internet snooping and fishing expeditions through one's personal history are here to stay. Even policies that stipulate what can and cannot be used in a hiring or promotion decision are not likely to make much difference in practice. Can committee members be instructed to forget what they have come to know by extralegal means, as if they had violated job candidates' Miranda rights?

I can't think of another profession, apart from politics or film acting, in which one's past is always threatening to intrude on the peace of one's present life. Academe is full of bitter disputes and personal antagonisms. Everything you say can be held against you, and you are required to say things all the time. It's a hard lesson for academics to learn that freedom of speech — without the most vigilant forethought — is really the last thing one wants to exercise if one desires a reasonably secure and successful career as a professor. To speak freely is dangerous, but to not speak freely — in the context of the moment — undermines one of the reasons for being a professor in the first place.

We now advise our students not to put anything on Facebook that they wouldn't want in the hands of a future employer. I am beginning to face undergraduates who are reluctant to participate in online discussion forums because they cannot control what will be done with their comments on controversial issues. Our entire lives — and our freedom of expression — are now constrained by the need to consider everything we say or do in terms of employability. We have internalized the boss, and there is, increasingly, nowhere to hide, no time that is off the record, and certainly no time to experiment in public with what one believes: to try new ideas and personae and move on.

One sometimes hears lamentations from aging Young Turks about the absence of innovation in the humanities. But young academics are caught between contradictory impulses: publish frequently (and

with a political edge), but do not publish anything controversial, particularly not anything that has a direct bearing on the status quo of the profession or the reputations of one's elders. This contradiction partly explains the prevalence of scholarly writing that is intelligible to only a small group of insiders: One can get away with extremely subtle refinements on small topics, but one must not address subjects of general concern beyond the level of platitudes. You want 100 people to know your name, not 30,000 or 10 million.

Given the radical disequilibrium between job candidates and academic positions, anyone who stands out as obviously controversial in a national context is not likely to get far in his or her job search. There will be too many criticisms out there that can be made to stick, and the academic who steps into controversy inevitably will produce many ill-considered remarks — in the heat of debate — that can be used for all kinds of unforeseen purposes. You will not be able to disavow your mistakes, because no one will ask you to: It will all be decided privately. And the development of one's complex, changing persona is blocked by the demand that one must stand behind everything one has ever said or done, no matter how long ago.

For all those reasons, the prudent advice for ambitious young academics is to keep your mouth shut, stay away from practical activism, and write only with great precision on acceptable scholarly subtopics. Create nothing that can be used to simplify, typecast, or otherwise condemn you as "unprofessional."

The inescapability of one's past is a dark theme, but perhaps it can be lightened by a sense that exposure can lead to freedom from fear. Consider the reappearance in *Middlemarch* of Raffles, the companion of the respectable Bulstrode's youth:

Raffles: "By Jove, Nick, it's you! I couldn't be mistaken, though the five-and-twenty years have played old Bogey with us both! How are you, eh? You didn't expect to see me here. Come, shake us by the hand."

Bulstrode: "I did not indeed expect to see you in this remote country place."

Raffles takes up unwelcome residence in Bulstrode's house, all the while threatening to reveal the banker's unsavory past. When Raffles dies under suspicious circumstances, Bulstrode is suspected of murder and is ruined. He and his devoted wife leave *Middlemarch* in disgrace, although undoubtedly happier than they were before. They have lost their standing in a small town, but the truth has made them free, and they have all the world before them.

This notion of personal exposure seems so liberating: "I do not pretend to be perfect. Take me for what I am, and I will accept you in return. I know you cannot be contained by a single utterance." As Walt Whitman says, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes."

If the Internet — and an explosion of other new technologies — means we can never shed our pasts, then I hope we will learn to deal with this exposure with greater tolerance, openness, understanding, and forgiveness. But given the increasingly competitive nature of our profession, that seems optimistic and naïve, like something Daisy Miller would say.

In the end, I am afraid, we are accountable for everything we have said and done, public or private, known or unknown, spurious or authenticated, from now until we retire or quit to become lawyers or sales reps. We academics are finally living in the Panopticon — the prison of complete surveillance — we are so fond of locating elsewhere. And if that is the case, a professor can be forgiven for dreaming, sometimes, that freedom lies in some other occupation.