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Historicizing Presentism: Toward the Creation of a Journal of the Public Humanities

By Jeffrey R. Wilson

What happens when a historicist is confronted with the prospect of presentism? The same thing that happens when a historicist comes face-to-face with anything else: it gets historicized. That's what I set out to do. I did not expect to come to the conclusion that we need a new publication: the *Journal of the Public Humanities*.

I.

There's always been tension between historicism and presentism. The term *presentism* originated in the twentieth century in the discipline of history as a pejorative for the faulty understanding of the past in terms of the present. Defining *presentism* as “a bias towards the present or present-day attitudes, esp. in the interpretation of history,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives 1916 as the term's first instance (“Presentism, N.”). The term didn't register a significant presence until the 1940s; its prominence crept slowly upward until, in the mid-1980s, its popularity skyrocketed. The term is now more popular than ever (see fig. 1), most memorably addressed in the 2002 essay “Against Presentism,” by the historian Lynn Hunt, president of the American Historical Society at the time, who wrote, “presentism besets us in two different ways: (1) the tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms; and (2) the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past.” In literary studies today, however, presentism is less a bad form of historical inquiry and more a good form of political scholarship.

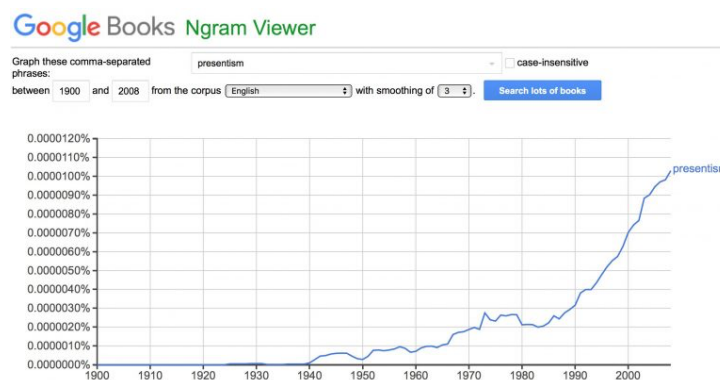


Fig. 1. A Google Ngram search for *presentism*. The Ngram Viewer tracks the relative frequency of words over time in a representative sample from the digital

II.

“Good” presentism began in Shakespeare studies in the 1990s when Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes took issue with the new historicism dominating literary studies at the time.¹ New historicism was an update on the old historicism of the early twentieth century, which sought to study the past as scientists study the world: objectively.² Old historicism wanted what scientists call *pure research* (sometimes *basic research*)—an accurate understanding of the topic at hand, knowledge for knowledge’s sake. New historicism argued that the objective study of the past failed, first, because it focused too much on high culture at the expense of details from the margins of society, and, second, because we human beings, situated in the world as we are, are constitutionally incapable of engaging with the past outside the present’s conditioning influence upon us.³ Here presentism is not something to avoid or pursue. It’s a condition of being. We have never not been presentist.

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New historicism pursued knowledge of the past within those confines, yet its quest for an updated, qualified, theoretically valid form of pure research obscured, for Grady and Hawkes, the importance of what scientists call *applied research*: the implementation of scholarly knowledge to enhance

the quality of our lives and worlds.⁴ We must learn

from the past, as the saying goes. In pursuing political efficacy, Grady and Hawkes drew on the British cultural materialism of the 1980s, the activist counterpart to America's more scholarly new historicism, taking cues from Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin, and before them Karl Marx's complaint that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (15).⁵ In early-twenty-first-century Shakespeare studies, pure research fought back with a movement called new materialism, a return to the accumulation of historical particulars bordering on deliberately obscurantist antiquarianism (one of the movement's leading proponents called new materialism "the new boredom" [Kastan 31]): history for history's sake.⁶

So the tension is not between a historicism hoping to overcome the distorting frame of the present to achieve objectivity and a presentism using the concerns of today to motivate our study of yesteryears. The real tension is between a historicism trying to be pure research and a presentism aiming for applied research. The historicist wants to understand the world, the presentist to change it. There are different goals: the historicist wants knowledge, the presentist justice. The historicist wants to be a scientist, the presentist a politician.

III.

This is also the tension motivating Stanley Fish's argument about professional correctness (*Professional Correctness; Save the World*). Arguing against professors and institutions of higher education who see their mission as the cultivation of good character in

students and a citizenry prepared to participate in democracy, Fish thinks academics should aim low: don't try to make your students better people; don't try to fashion good character; don't promote your principles of virtue; don't advocate for policies and politicians. Instead, do what you've been trained to do. As a Shakespearean, I've been trained to explain *King Lear*, but I shouldn't draw an analogy between King Lear's unhinged premodern machismo and the same in Donald Trump. Remain in an analytical posture seeking an understanding of truth, Fish suggests; don't lapse into an ethical or political mode aiming to better society. Here the belief that academia is a venue for the exposition of truth clashes with the belief that academia needs to exert moral leadership, especially in perilous times.

Why is there resistance to applied research in the humanities? Because if academia really is about the search for truth, as Fish argues (and I agree), it is difficult to apply the criteria of truth to ethical and political admonitions. Consider three statements: Donald Trump was born in 1946; Donald Trump is a dishonest politician; and Donald Trump should be impeached. The first is a statement of fact: it is transparently true. The second is a statement of interpretation: not pure data but analysis. Most people would accept the second statement as true because it is a reliable interpretation of evidence, but some would not, and others would qualify it. It is more difficult to determine the truth-value of the third statement. Is it true that Donald Trump should be impeached? Not to many people, even those who think he is a dishonest politician and much worse.

Ethical and political statements about actions we should take are problematic from the vantage of truth. Answers to the question *What should we do?* operate in the arena of opinion—more charitably, of judgment—rather than fact and truth. When we define academia as a discourse designed to search for, discover, and disseminate truth, ethical and political conclusions drawn from historical and analytical research are bound to be viewed with suspicion.

IV.

Fish's argument about professional correctness annoys many academics who see it as renegeing on the moral responsibility of higher education. I see it, instead, as an affirmation of truth as the greatest good in life, and a defense of the pursuit of truth in the face of a more immediate, less difficult pursuit of pleasure. Yet Fish's call to "academicize" everything (*Save the World* 27)—analyze the topic at hand to understand it, but don't politicize your knowledge to make the world a better place—obviously challenges a presentist who is interested in studying the past to motivate action in the future.

In Fish's scheme you have, on the one hand, academics who know everything about the world yet have no say in the way it's run; on the other hand, you have politicians running the world who know nothing about it. Ideally, there would be some institutional mechanism to ensure that academic knowledge about the world successfully transitions into public policy designed to make the world a better place. Climate change and gun control are only the most obvious failures to transition knowledge into policy, although in

general, paradoxically, the sciences are better than the humanities at communicating their research to the public by exploiting the resources of the popular press to de-academicize their ideas and make them easily accessible to a general audience, explaining why they matter.

No one wants some government agency designed to transfer knowledge from academia to the public to be responsible for determining what the government holds to be true. That institution would instantly be politicized, with moneyed lobbyists able to buy truth. State-sponsored truth is not a good thing. The absence of that institutional mechanism is, however, what prompts academics acting on an individual basis to politicize their research in the classroom and in presentism. The discourse of presentism aims to mend—on an individual basis—a gap between academia and the public created by the absence of any recognizable initiative to make research in the humanities publicly accessible and consequential.

So maybe we stick to pure research: identifying and analyzing fact, truth, and reality, hoping academically derived knowledge succeeds in the marketplace of ideas, becoming public policy. That's the status quo, but it's feeble because the best ideas aren't always the most popular. The status quo risks wasting the immense knowledge amassed by academics. A better solution is to presentize our academic research in the popular press. It's absurd to me that the sciences have more formal and more successful strategies for communicating their knowledge to the public than the humanities, which explicitly specialize in language and communication. Popular science is an established

genre.⁷ Science journalism is a thing.⁸ There's no *popular humanities* or *humanities journalism*. To be successful, presentism requires a change of genre from the academic articulations done in academic journals, books, and classrooms to the public articulations done through the popular press and community events. Presentism is something we need not instead of historicism but in addition to it. Changing the genre of presentism will take time and energy, not to mention money; to be successful, presentism will need broad institutional and financial support.

V.

Over the past three years, I've grappled more than ever with Fish's argument that politics have no place in the classroom. While I agree that academics should stick to their areas of proficiency rather than comment willy-nilly on current events, the Trump administration's attack on facts, truth, and academic expertise renders such a distinction tricky, especially when I teach my first-year writing course. Defining *academic writing* (per Fish) as the search for truth, my course aims to teach students how to responsibly and effectively interpret evidence and construct arguments. The aversion to intellectual honesty and integrity in the Trump administration is squarely within the purview of the subject matter of our course; to ignore this characteristic of the administration would be to renege on my academic responsibility. And knowledge of things like tyranny and tragedy in Shakespeare's plays helps us understand current events. We can talk about politics without being political as long as we pursue analysis and understanding, not advocacy and action. This is true even if the analysis is highly criti-

cal: we shouldn't cower from speaking the truth as we understand it just because that truth is about politics or because it makes someone look bad. Just as the present can be used to motivate our interpretation of the past, the past can be used to enhance our understanding of the present—both cases still operating in the analytical mode of Fish's "academicization." So there's something we could call *analytical presentism*, the first of several additional presentisms available to us.

With the turn of the twenty-first century, good presentism moved outward from Shakespeare to other areas of literary study. In 1999, Bruce Robbins brought it to bear on Victorian studies in a short essay, "Presentism, Pastism, Professionalism," observing that a fetishistic *pastism* is as unwelcome as naive presentism. In 2008, the historian Lynn Fendler wrote the influential essay "The Upside of Presentism," coining the term *strategic presentism* to describe the deliberate use of concerns of our current moment to motivate our study of the past. In 2015, the V21 Collective formed to promote "Victorian studies for the 21st century," arguing that historical inquiry must be willing to generalize and theorize in abstract schemes with an eye toward the present ("Manifesto"). Especially with the V21 Collective, the promotion of presentism has been wrapped up with the crisis in the humanities; as student enrollment and research support shrink in the face of a preference for STEM fields, we humanists have been eager to illustrate our importance to outsiders who don't understand or value what we do.

Meanwhile, another form of presentism popped up in Shakespeare studies: the massive field of Shakespearean performance, criticism, adaptation, and appropriation—what Donald Hedrick and Bryan Reynolds term “Shakespace”—has led scholars to engage in historicist readings of presentist readings of Shakespeare. We can engage in a historicism of presentism, not simply as a theoretical position, which I have sought to historicize here, but as a human activity. We can analyze historically situated efforts to presentize the past—a historical presentism. Thus there are, by my count, six varieties of presentism:

1. *Naive presentism*: unreflectively using the terms of the present to interpret the past; bad presentism in the discipline of history
2. *Strategic presentism*: deliberately using concerns of the present to motivate our study of the past; here the present is a lens for looking at the past, which is the object of study
3. *Analytical presentism*: using an interpretation of the past to cultivate an interpretation of the present; here the past is a lens for looking at the present, which is the object of study
4. *Theoretical presentism*: using particulars from the past to create abstract schemes and ideas with the potential to elucidate the present and even the future; a more ambitious form of the analytical model
5. *Political presentism*: using applied research to draw parallels between the past and present for a call to action in the here and now; ultimately, the mode here is advocacy rather than interpretation

6. *Historical presentism*: analyzing presentisms from the past—past uses of the past to interpret the present and the present to interpret the past; this model returns to pure research, but now doing pure research of applied research

Apart from naive presentism, none of these modes is inherently good or bad, better or worse than the others. And there is nothing intrinsically wrong with either historicism or presentism. No presentists think historical contextualization is a bad idea. No historicists think relevance is evil. Rather, different academics express preferences for different modes based on different desires, and there are disputes about the proper venue for each activity. These are matters of taste (each analyst's preference for the mode of inquiry) and decorum (using the right method in the right time and place). Specifically, many historicists feel political presentism is inappropriate for academic writing and teaching.

VI.

Strategic, analytical, theoretical, and historical presentism are not problematic from the perspective of professional correctness; these models are pure research pursuing truth and understanding, though there are differences in subject (understanding of the past versus understanding of the present) and method (using the present to interpret the past versus using the past to interpret the present or future). These are presentisms Fish could get behind. Political presentism is troublesome, however, when we define academia as a discourse designed to search for, discover, and disseminate truth (as I, like Fish, think we should).

That's why I (like Fish) think political presentism needs to be done in public venues rather than academic writing and teaching, but I (unlike Fish, whose book arguing these ideas is titled *Save the World on Your Own Time*) also think academic institutions need to support public writing and teaching more vigorously. Right now, humanists have no professional incentive to go public, a problem only exacerbated with the adjunctification of higher education. That's why the rise of the public humanities is exciting and long overdue.⁹

VII.

In 2017 at a Shakespeare conference, Hugh Grady, one of the leading voices of presentism in Shakespeare studies, delivered the keynote address. His lecture, “Whiteness, Past and Present: Reading *Antony and Cleopatra* in the Obama Era,” was written years earlier, during the Obama years, but the edited collection it was part of went through several delays; Grady worried his talk would no longer apply in the age of Trump. There is a real tension between the completely legitimate desire to presentize our academic research and the equally legitimate protocols of academic publication—namely, peer review. Add to this bucket of cold water the issue of audience: the Shakespeare scholars in attendance at Grady's talk already understood the issues about race he was revealing by way of a presentist engagement with the past. It was the folks not in the room who most needed to hear his ideas. Here presentism was preaching to the choir.

I told this story at the 2018 MLA Annual Convention during a roundtable discussion on presentism. As our conversation navigated first from questions about pre-

sentism as a highly technical question concerning historical methodology, then to questions about the place of politics in academia and academia in politics, and finally to questions about the public humanities, we saw *presentism* transform before our eyes into a banner term that brought together a wide swath of concerns. The common denominator was academics with knowledge about the past but concerns about the present, especially the eclipse of academic, specifically humanistic knowledge in the public sphere.

My final statement to the group was that I have a vision for a new publication situated somewhere between an academic journal and a news magazine.

While there is mounting energy in the public humanities, there is also a gap in the publishing market that is not meeting this energy's demand. There are peer-reviewed academic journals such as *Public: A Journal of Imagining America* and *The Public Historian*—by academics, for academics—that chronicle civic engagement programs and community outreach initiatives. There are outlets that de-academicize scholarly work for a largely academic but nonspecialist audience, such as *JSTOR Daily*, *Humanities: The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities*, *The American Scholar*, and *The Conversation*. And there are journalistic venues that draw heavily from the world of academia, both established magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, which have successfully transitioned online, and born-digital ventures like *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *Zócalo Public Square*. Part of the demand for the journal I'm envisioning comes from authors writing for cultural magazines like these, which are multiplying by the day; going more in-depth, the journal would be an explainer for the explainers. But

the demand also comes directly from a general public who, in the wake of the 2008 recession—when a panic about employability drove students to STEM, technical, and vocational fields—eschewed the humanities during their formal education. While many of those young professionals are now looking around and realizing how vital the humanities are—it’s people trained in the humanities that have saved the nation from collapse—there isn’t an agreed-upon platform for the public to find authoritative academic expertise on the emerging topics of the day. And there isn’t an agreed-upon venue for academics to write to the public in a way that is rigorous in thought and research, accessible in language and style, and speedy in delivery to readers. The United States doesn’t have a rendezvous for a public desperate for humanistic knowledge and the scholars ready to serve. Thus, both academics and citizens turn to a hodgepodge of news aggregators, personal blogs, and preferred outlets, such as *Arts and Letters Daily*.

VIII.

Enter the *Journal of Public Humanities*, a new journal that could connect an educated public looking for authoritative yet accessible academic expertise on the big issues of our times with humanities scholars looking to write for a general audience. *JSTOR Daily* (“Where news meets its scholarly match”) and *The Conversation* (“academic rigor, journalistic flair”) come closest to what I’m calling for, though they emphasize scientific and social scientific research, and coverage rather than depth.¹⁰ But as the public humanities solidify their institutional footprint—with graduate programs now established at schools like

Brown, Yale, and Georgetown¹¹—let’s imagine a corresponding journal with scholarship for what society is thinking about. Big social questions, bold scholarly answers. Humanistic knowledge for the people.

The journal would be a meeting point, not only for the diasporic individuals and agencies working toward public humanities but also for that collective to connect with the people. Because the goal is a

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big-tent initiative, I imagine the *Journal of Public Humanities* could feature three genres: humanities scholarship for public readers; art, creative writing, and other nonscholarly modes by humanities scholars or engaged with the humanities; and articles about civic engagement in the humanities. It would be open to all periods and genres. It would be open to different methodologies provided the arguments attend to the relation of the past to the present. The presentism employed could be strategic, analytical, theoretical, political, or historical; the abiding concern would be the ongoing meaning and relevance of the past in the twenty-first century and beyond. To ensure responsiveness to current events, it would need to be an online publication, but, to ensure rigor and accuracy, it would need to be peer-reviewed. Those dueling commitments would require a nimble editorial board with flexible schedules; the journal would have to be well-funded to allow for course release or compensation for editorial duties. The journal should be dedicated to reversing the trend in which writers, reviewers, and editors do academic work for free. That model is indefensible in the age of adjunctification. We can no longer expect academic work to be rewarded with ten-

ure down the line (though, because the journal would be peer-reviewed, junior academics, often discouraged from public writing, would get institutional credit toward tenure).

The journal might publish issues quarterly, four or five new articles each issue, some submitted, some commissioned. Those pieces would be of-the-moment, open-access, peer-reviewed, and long-form, written with both fire and footnotes. Imagine (drawing examples from the past few years) articles from a women's studies scholar on #MeToo and #TimesUp; a medieval historian on *Game of Thrones*; a drama scholar on *Hamilton* in the context of the American musical; a rhetorician on Trump's language and why it's effective; a Latin Americanist on the significance of the song "Desposito"; a moral philosopher on whether religion does more harm than good; a legal scholar on the history of impeachment; a media scholar on terrorism as performance; a book historian on the publishing industry in the age of the Internet; a literary theorist on Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize in Literature; a comparative literature scholar on contemporary North Korean literature; or an art historian on exhibits for the five hundredth anniversary of Leonardo da Vinci's death. Imagine those essays appearing while society is talking about those issues, not two years later. Articles of this sort are out there, but scattered, so you have to hunt. Imagine, instead, scanning through an issue of the *Journal of Public Humanities* from 2016 to see a table of contents with titles like "The Case for Reparations," "The Logic of Effective Altruism," "Lessons from Literary Vegetarianism," and "Single Women Are Now the Most Potent Political Force in America."¹² Or from 2017 with "Why Pop Culture Just

Can't Deal with Black Male Sexuality," "Powerlessness and the Politics of Blame," "America's Gun Fantasy," and "What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?"¹³ Or from 2018 with "Literature and Happiness," "The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change," "Opening the Audiobook," and "Poetry in the Age of Consumer-Generated Content."¹⁴

IX.

If you look around and don't see the journal you want to read, you have to create it. I want to be as clear and strategic as possible: I have no idea how to start a journal, and I'm not the first to think a journal for the public humanities would be a good thing. Previous efforts have fizzled out, but this time it feels different. We're living in a different age than we were three years ago. I invite you to voice your thoughts with the hashtag #PublicHumanities. Lend support. Launch critique. Give advice. Express your interest to serve as a reader or adviser. What essays do you want to see? What's your dream essay? (Mine would be David Quint, author of *Epic and Empire*, on *Star Wars* as an American epic.) What would you write about? Go ahead, pitch an idea. Maybe the conversation catches ahold. Maybe it creates momentum. Maybe it channels a common cause for a lot of people and agencies who have been thinking in similar ways. Maybe some of these folks have experience running a journal. Maybe some have ideas about funding.

X.

The mission statement at my school cuts to the chase: “The mission of Harvard College is to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society” (“Mission”). Our schools exist for the people, so why do scholars usually write only for other scholars? That model bespeaks a vision of trickle-down education few of us would endorse, one that, if we look around, seems not to be working.

The system of education in America is in flux if not crisis. Government funding in public schools has fallen dramatically in the past decade. Intellectuals have ceded the public square to social media and cable news. There are social consequences. Level of education was a major predictor of how people voted in the 2016 presidential election. With attacks on facts, truth, logic, and expertise coming from the highest office in the land, the cycle is vicious, the future grim.

We need to show leadership, especially at well-off places like Harvard.¹⁵ We need to think more creatively about what education is and the best ways to do it. I work for the richest university in the history of the world. If we’re not willing to use our resources to educate the people—even those beyond our campus—we are failing the goal we set for ourselves. Let’s put our money where our mission is and fund a platform for educating not just our students, not just our colleagues, and not just our alumni but the citizens of America. Let’s show our students how to be citizen-leaders.

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1. This early history is best narrated in Grady, "Terence Hawkes."

2. Old historicism sought to relate "how it really was," as called for in the preface to von Ranke's *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations*. In Shakespeare studies, old historicism is especially associated with Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* and *Shakespeare's History Plays*.

3. The term *new historicism* was coined—unintentionally—in Greenblatt's introduction to *Forms of Power* (3). See also Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics," and Montrose.

4. See Grady, "Postmodernist Shakespeare"; Hawkes; and Grady and Hawkes. For further developments of presentism in Shakespeare studies, see also Fernie; DiPietro; Streete; Holbo; Grady, "Presentism"; Gajowski; DiPietro and Grady, "Presentism"; Drakakis; and DiPietro and Grady, *Shakespeare*.

5. "Shot through with chips of Messianic time," presentism is grounded in Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (263).

6. On new materialism, in addition to Kastan, see Wells; Harris; Bruster; Hadfield; Grady, "Shakespeare Studies"; Sedinger; King; Salkeld; and Stevens.

7. The magazine *Popular Science* was founded in 1872. See "History"; Topham.

8. On science journalism, see Rensberger; Bauer and Bucchi.

9. Broadly speaking, there are two versions of the public humanities. One seeks to promote public intellectuals translating academic ideas into public fora. The other seeks civic engagement by creating cultural and community organizations and partnerships outside academia. For a helpful history, see Schroeder. An additional set of reflections is available in the essays collected by Phiddian.

10. See daily.jstor.org/; theconversation.com/us.

11. See the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University (www.brown.edu/academics/public-humanities), the Public Humanities at Yale University (ph.yale.edu), and the Connected Academics task force establishing a public humanities PhD program at Georgetown University (reinventphd.georgetown.edu).

12. See Coates; Singer; Mintz; and Traister.

13. See Morris; Nussbaum; Andersen; and Dederer.

14. See Moores; Rich; van Maas; and Dworkin.

15. This venture must be cautious that, as Mullen argues, public humanities initiatives can reify the hierarchy of authority that privileges moneyed academic institutions over grassroots public culture. But I think Mullen presents a false choice between public-facing academic initiatives and a radical restructuring of the university. Not all institutions are the work of the devil. Institutions can serve people if the institutions are properly directed.

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