

## Is This the End?

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In the final decade of the sixteenth century, Christopher Marlowe premiered a play that from its beginning took up questions of endings and ends. In his first speech, Doctor Faustus exhorts himself to “level at the end of every art” before concluding that he has gone as far as possible in logic and medicine, and that law and divinity hold no attraction. Only necromancy, with its promise “of power, of honour, of omnipotence,” offers great enough reward for the “studious artizan.”<sup>1</sup> From the repetition of the word “end” five times in the monologue’s first eighteen lines to the expiration of Faust’s contract and subsequent damnation, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1592) emphasizes the entanglement of the ends of knowledge with the end(s) of humanity itself. At the close of the Elizabethan era and in a period of shifting epistemologies, Marlowe created a character who deemed the staid subjects of university education moribund and saw little point to learning beyond self-enrichment.

That, though, was not the end of learning. Writing in a new century and under a new monarch, Francis Bacon called for both a new start to knowledge production and a reconsideration of its ends. “The greatest error of all,” he wrote in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), “is the mistaking or misplacing of the last or furthest end of knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Its “true ends,” he later wrote, were neither professional reputation, financial gain, nor love of learning, but rather “the uses and benefits of life, to improve and conduct it in charity.”<sup>3</sup> Bacon devised the

*Novum Organum* (1620) as both the blueprint for and beginning of a generations-long and worldwide effort to seek these “ends.” Now, 400 years after his *Great Instauration*, as we face the new era that will emerge from the coalescent crises of Covid-19, climate disaster, the right-wing war on education, and the precarity of the neoliberal university, we believe the time has come again for knowledge producers across fields and disciplines to reorient their work around the question of “ends.” As scholars and disciplines pursue their individual knowledge projects, they must be able to answer the questions: why do we do what we do, and how could we know that we were done?

Bacon’s terms—*exitus*, *finis*, *terminus*—suggest a focus on outcomes as well as endpoints. Knowledge, in his philosophy, had “ends” (that is, purposes) as well as an end (a point at which the project would be complete). The New Science, he believed, would lead to “the proper end and termination of infinite error” and was worth undertaking precisely because an end was possible: “For it is better to make a beginning of a thing which has a chance of an end, than to get caught up in things which have no end, in perpetual struggle and exertion” (*New Organon* 3). The following year, Robert Burton took a (predictably) less sanguine view of knowledge production in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Considering the lot of “our divines, the most noble profession and worthy of double honours,” who despite that worthiness had little hope of reward or encouragement, he asked, “to what end should we study? ... Why do we take such pains?”<sup>4</sup> The certitude of the natural philosopher and the rhetorical lament of the humanist scholar suggest a division between modes and objects of inquiry that remains stereotypical of the STEM-humanities divide but that may hinder consideration of shared goals and methods.

A final exemplar, however—also writing in a new century and during the dawn of a new age—reminds us that the question and its answers belong to all who produce knowledge and all

those on whose behalf they work. On Jan. 21, 1802, the chemist, inventor, and erstwhile poet Humphry Davy delivered an introductory lecture on chemistry at the Royal Institution that again took up the matter of ends. In its conclusion, he cast aside “delusive dreams of the infinite improbability of man, the annihilation of labor, disease, and even death” in favor of pursuits both broader and more abstract. After decrying the disparities of rank and unequal division of labor and property that had become the soul of “civilized life,” he expressed his hope that humanity would become more enlightened and more happy, and his expectation “that the great whole of society should be ultimately connected together by means of knowledge and the useful arts; that they should act as the children of one great parent, with one determinate end, so that no power may be rendered useless, no exertions thrown away.”<sup>5</sup> Davy saw the chemist and inventor as seeking the same end as the doctor, artist, literary scholar, political economist, or philosopher. The purpose of the pursuit of knowledge was the integration, rather than division, of society.

In the century that followed, the universities of Europe institutionalized the modern academic disciplines. Many branches of knowledge have since gone their separate ways, with the narrow-but-deep research concept structuring the university and academics’ research projects. Recent changes in technologies and institutions, however, as well as mounting political pressure, have refocused attention on the specialized nature of knowledge. As John Bender observes, “The Enlightenment ended long ago, and its initial ends are part of history, but its purposes return as new impulses that produce seemingly new endings.”<sup>6</sup> In the context of the “knowledge economy” of the Information Age, can we still conceptualize “ends” as Bacon did? Does an individual discipline have a telos and even an endpoint? What do an experiment on a fruit fly, a reading of a poem, and the writing of a line of code share in terms of purpose and potential? Scholars tend to be constitutionally resistant to this kind of thinking; but while we may resist the

concept of “ends” our end is being defined for us, as certain disciplines are cast as having no purpose and therefore as needing to come to an end. Even as the need for critical perspectives on scientific and techno-utopic thinking becomes increasingly obvious, some universities are taking the current crises as an opportunity to cut programs in African-American studies, English, philosophy, and foreign language studies.<sup>7</sup> In response, academic departments and disciplines, especially but not solely in the humanities, face an urgent need to specify what they do and why they do it.

Covid-19 has only underlined the nature of the university in a larger Age of Precarity defined by privatization, adjunctification, and corporatization. If we want the university to remain a space for knowledge production, scholars across disciplines must be able to clarify the purpose of their knowledge projects—in part to advance the Enlightenment project of “useful knowledge” and in part to defend themselves from public and political mischaracterization. As scholars of eighteenth-century studies, we have special insight into a period both when it was assumed that the pursuit of knowledge should have an end and when people began to create structures for people to arrive at consensus while fostering a range of perspectives. The rise of the public sphere offered a framework for individuals to retain their identities within a collective framework. New genres of writing, such as periodical essays, scientific journals, letter collections, and novels, allowed readers to compare their personal experiences to representative examples. Knowledge, authors repeated, should be “improving”—it should both constantly build on itself, leading to the betterment of society, and it should improve the individual practitioner. As eighteenth-centuryists, therefore, we call on scholars to revisit Bacon’s foundational question of the Enlightenment at another inflection point in its long history: what is “the last or furthest end of knowledge?”

Of course, there will be an enormous variety of responses and we do not argue that it is necessary for everyone to have the same “end.” A diversity of opinion is part of the question’s history. We might think our goal is to get to the truth, wherever it lies, or to encourage aesthetic appreciation, or to mold model citizens. We co-authors may not share precisely the same end. For King, literary studies is a discipline that fosters the skills to recognize and analyze how meaning is shaped by form as well as content; how what we say is often subordinate to the way we say it. Literary works offer special locations to hone these skills because they are particularly attuned to the dynamic interplay between form and content, and the eighteenth century was a period of extreme experimentation with, and indeed creation of, the category of literature. Rudy, in contrast, wonders if literary studies still constitutes a “discipline” at all, or if its life as such has already ended even though its institutional infrastructures—departments, conferences, journals—remain. As Ephraim Chambers observed in his *Cyclopædia: or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts Sciences* (1728), “’Tis, in effect, to Language that we are chiefly indebted for what we call Science ... In effect, by Language, we are much upon the same footing, in respect of Knowledge, as if each individual had the natural Sense of a thousand.”<sup>8</sup> If, as he insists, language is the principal means by which *all* knowledge is ordered, expanded, and transmitted, then the crucial work of literary studies would best be done in a paradigm that distinguished it as complementary rather than competitive with other “disciplines.”

Other scholars have similarly felt that the present moment calls for a consideration of goals and purposes. In many ways, we could see what Rita Felski has called the “method wars” within literary studies as an argument over ends: “The focus has shifted from theoretical claims or empirical arguments to matters of method and mood, style and sensibility—in short, the various procedures and practices that inform our encounter with a text.”<sup>9</sup> Although this might

seem like a turn away from “ends,” the urgency of the question of *how* we do literary studies derives from the question of *why* we do it. The only reason to pursue a particular method is to arrive at a particular destination—perhaps, in the process, to complete a project. In reasserting the centrality of formal analysis to literary studies, New Formalists have been particularly explicit about this interconnection of *how* and *why*. Caroline Levine offers perhaps the grandest version when she contends, “Formalist analysis turns out to be as valuable to understanding sociopolitical institutions as it is to reading literature. Forms are at work everywhere.”<sup>10</sup> For Levine, the critical skill of formalist interpretation transfers to the political forms that structure our lives, from timetables to schoolrooms to chains of command. Indeed, Sandra Macpherson insists that “form is arguably the *only* expertise our discipline can claim to possess.”<sup>11</sup> But other methodologies have also worked to articulate the goals of literary studies. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, for example, describe surface reading as an effort “to describe texts accurately,” continuing, “The purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself.”<sup>12</sup> And from another sense of “the end,” Clifford Siskin and William Warner have called for “stopping cultural studies” because, they argue, it “can no longer take literary studies where it needs to go” (although they also concede, “We don’t pretend to know exactly where that is”).<sup>13</sup> Although it initially sounds strange, it is not anathema to literary scholars to discuss either telos or endpoint.

These examples show the value of articulating ends, as each view gains force from its explicit attention to larger disciplinary and epistemological stakes. We argue that, as eighteenth-centuryists, we are particularly well positioned to understand the reordering of knowledge that is taking place today. Our period saw the creation of myriad new systems for sorting and accessing information, from alphabetized dictionaries to binomial nomenclature to stadial histories. It also

saw the creation of the category of Literature as a specialized kind of writing and the first university position dedicated to the study of this new meta-genre.<sup>14</sup> We do not want to abandon disciplinarity and its benefits: the expertise and authority that come from delimiting a space of inquiry. But it may be that the now-traditional organization of the English department, with its faculty, graduate students, and courses specializing in historical periods, is no longer optimal. But while humanities disciplines may be stereotyped as engaging in abstruse, irrelevant investigations with no particular endpoint, the inverse perception of STEM fields—that they should produce “facts” that have no need for analysis and interpretation—has paradoxically contributed to a wide-scale crisis of trust in scientific results, as STEM often lacks the integration with the humanities that would allow its knowledge to be explained and contextualized for wider audiences. The solution is neither “dedisciplinarity” nor an interdisciplinarity that essentially maintains current structures.<sup>15</sup> Instead, it is to forge new disciplines that have “ends” in their sights. One end of this new knowledge system would be to demonstrate the necessity of the integration of humanities and STEM disciplines in a functioning society.

With mounting economic, political, epistemological, and now epidemiological pressures on humanities scholars, social scientists, and scientists—from accusations of the “hoax” of climate change to the “uselessness” of a humanities degree to the need to attend a college or university at all—the time is ripe for retheorizing the ultimate purposes of knowledge production and the structure of its platforms and institutions. The various answers to the question of “ends” should be able to scale up and scale down, demonstrating how a particular experiment/class/subfield/reading/method could expand to meet the larger goals of disciplines and institutions as well as those of the world. In some ways, the concept of having an end may be as significant as the individual answers that scholars articulate. It might be relatively simple to

imagine the end, for example, of medicine: the cure of all human illnesses (or perhaps the defeat of death). It is less easy to conceptualize the ultimate purposes of economics, physics, artificial intelligence, or political science. Disciplinarity may have occluded the very idea of some end to these subjects by becoming an end in itself.

Focusing on the last and furthest ends, however, may allow us to find a life after disciplinarity for subjects such as English, classics, and journalism, which face immediate threats to the structure if not the substance of their contributions. We hope that our call to articulate why we do what we do—whoever the “we” is, whatever the “what” is—may allow us together to chart a preliminary course towards the reorganization of knowledge production as a whole. The scholarly way of life and disciplinary structure currently in place has proved to be unsustainable; to get past it, we have to know where we are going.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus (A-Text)*, in *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, edited by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford, 1998), 140.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *The Major Works*, edited by Brian Vickers (Oxford, 2002), 147.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, edited by Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge, 2000), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, edited by Holbrook Jackson (New York, 2001), 312.

<sup>5</sup> Humphry Davy, *The Collected Works of Sir Humphry Davy*, edited by John Davy (London, 1839), 323.

<sup>6</sup> John Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment* (Stanford, 2012), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Colleen Flaherty, “Canaries in a ‘Toxic Mine,’” *Inside Higher Education*, May 5, 2020; “Portsmouth University Sticks by English Literature Staff Cuts,” *BBC*, June 30, 2020; Colleen Flaherty, “Not the Same University,” *Inside Higher Education*, May 14, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopædia: Or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (London, 1728), vi.

<sup>9</sup> Rita Felski, “Introduction,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2014), v.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, N.J., 2015), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Macpherson, “A Little Formalism,” *ELH* 82, no. 2 (Summer 2015), 388.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009), 9, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford Siskin and William B. Warner, “Stopping Cultural Studies,” *Profession 2008* (2008), 95.

<sup>14</sup> On the rise of “Literature,” see Trevor Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon from the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* (Montreal, 1998), and Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1810* (Baltimore, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> On “de-disciplinarity” and interdisciplinarity see Clifford Siskin, “Gender, Sublimity, Culture: Retheorizing Disciplinary Desire,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1994), 38.