A catastrophe has led to the closure of classrooms across the country. Students are told that face-to-face instruction is no longer being offered by institutions of higher education. All classes will be conducted online until further notice. Faculty who began the semester with face-to-face courses are required now to convert all of them to online within a week. This event forever alters the future of higher education in the age of neoliberalism.

A catastrophe has led to the closure of online education across the country. Students are told that online instruction is no longer being offered by institutions of higher education. All classes will be conducted face-to-face until further notice. Faculty who began the semester with online courses are required now to convert all of them to face-to-face within a week. This event forever alters the future of higher education in the age of neoliberalism.

Two educational catastrophes. One grounded in reality and the other in fiction. For some, the elimination of face-to-face instruction would be greeted with great joy; for others, that emotion would be reserved only for the end of online instruction. One event pushes higher education backward into its history; the other propels it forward into its future. Not only do both scenarios provide us the opportunity to think about education from the perspective of catastrophe, but because we have had to deal recently with one of them, we might now have a different perspective on the other.
When the Coronavirus pandemic closed all institutions of higher education in the United States, online education was called upon to rescue it from complete shutdown. Faculty across the country were required to convert immediately their face-to-face courses to online ones so that students could continue, if not also finish, their semester. As this catastrophe occurred around spring break, most students had already completed about half of their semester. Online conversion of a face-to-face course under these conditions could then be viewed as affording faculty and students the opportunity to finish what they had started—albeit in a different, and for some faculty, an unfamiliar and abhorrent modality.

In 2017, there were just over 20 million students pursuing higher education in the United States. Over two-thirds of those students were not enrolled in any online courses. The onslaught of the Coronavirus pandemic therefore meant that around 13.5 million students of higher education became online students overnight. The magnitude of this catastrophe though might be tempered because without the option to conduct classes online, higher education in America would have been entirely closed for business. Online education offered students the opportunity to continue their education in a time of international health crisis—an option that would have been at lot more difficult if a catastrophe entirely wiped out online education.

Prior to the advent of the Internet and online education, an educational crisis of these proportions would have been dealt with very differently. One option would have been to continue coursework by correspondence. This would have involved students receiving instruction through printed textbooks and assignments through workbooks or learning guides. Once an assignment was completed, the student would then mail it back to the instructor, who upon grading it, would then mail the assignment back to the student. Same with tests, which of course would ideally be proctored.

The history of correspondence education in the United States was mainstream as far back as the 1890s, and by 1906, International Correspondence Schools, which is now Penn Foster, had 900,000 students and a sales force of 1200. Correspondence education was so well established at the turn of the century that the American philosopher, Charles Peirce, who had a notoriously bad relationship with institutions of higher education, even tried to get into the business of correspondence education. By the middle of the twentieth century, the leaders in correspondence
education were the University of Wisconsin Extension and the University of Maryland University College. If this all sounds really old-fashioned, consider that as late as 2002, I was teaching students through this method for Indiana University’s Independent Study Program.

The courses were ones that were regularly offered on the Bloomington campus: Comparative Literature 255—Modern Literature and the Other Arts; Philosophy 100—Introduction to Philosophy; and Philosophy 120—Elementary Ethics. I started teaching for the Independent Study Program in 1988 and would later write or co-write the learning guides for each of these courses. These courses were continuous enrollment and students had up to two years to complete them. Some of the students were traditional ones who also concurrently took courses on campus, but far more were not. They came from all over the country and some were even residing in far off places such as Iran and Germany. They were also from many different walks and stages of life including some incarcerated students, the most infamous of which was a Beverly Hills murderer, who took my ethics course from prison.

But short of credit-bearing correspondence courses, there would be other options for students to continue their education in times of catastrophe albeit informally. In Chapter 3, “Little Blue Books,” for example, I discuss the publisher Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, who became the so-called greatest-publisher-in-the-world by leveraging the potential of the United States and international postal system. Haldeman-Julius published small, cheap books on every subject imaginable and distributed them to a national and international audience exclusively by mail. These books were especially popular during the economic catastrophe known as the Great Depression, and during the Second World War, where soldiers could easily carry them in their pockets. But whereas correspondence courses and cheap books were the main options for alternative education in times catastrophe a century ago—and perhaps as late as the turn of the twentieth century—the new millennium offers some new alternatives for education at a distance. We now live in a digital age where communication, information, and education conducted online are as normal as the U.S. Postal Service was for those same things a century ago.

According to the latest figures, before the Coronavirus catastrophe, about 3.5 million students were enrolled in at least some online courses and 3.1 million were only enrolled in online courses. The Coronavirus pandemic of course changed all of these figures, but prior to it, less than 18% of students pursued some higher education online, and less than 16%
only pursued online education. While it is impossible to determine what percentage of the 3.5 million partially online students and the 3.1 million fully online students would not have been able to get to a classroom to complete their catastrophic semester face-to-face, it would have been far fewer that the 13.5 million students who went online overnight as a consequence of the Coronavirus.

It is going to take years to work through the ironies brought out by this higher educational catastrophe. First and foremost among them is that online instruction, higher education’s “dark horse,” bailed out face-to-face instruction in a time of catastrophe. This was something that was recognized within hours of the announcement that instruction would be online as a result of the pandemic. For example, the same day that it was first announced that some prestigious private universities were going online, late-night comedians started to satirize them for this decision. Here is how one put it: “Get this guys, Harvard just announced that they are sending all of their students home until further notice, and they will take classes online. Now if you meet someone who says they went to Harvard, you’ll be like, ‘Oh, that online school!’”

The impact though of this catastrophe was not only to the reputations of prestigious private non-profit institutions of higher education, but also to non-profit public institutions. Compared to for-profit institutions of higher education, non-profit institutions enroll far fewer students per capita online. In 2017, 11.3% of students at non-profit public institutions were exclusively online compared to 19.12% at private non-profit institutions, whereas 20.68% of students at non-profit public institutions were enrolled in some online courses compared to 9.53% at private non-profit institutions. Moreover, the vast majority of students at non-profit institutions did not enroll in any online courses before the Coronavirus catastrophe with non-profit private institutions (71.35%) slightly outpacing public institutions (68.01%) in this regard. However, compared to for-profit institutions, these pre-Coronavirus catastrophe online percentages for the non-profits are relatively low. In 2017, 49.05% of for-profit institution students were enrolled exclusively online, 9.35% enrolled in some online courses, and 41.6% did not enroll in any online courses. Overall, the 2017 percentages only tell part of the story of online education prior to the Coronavirus catastrophe because the total number of non-profit education students far exceeded the number of for profit education students: 9,977,334 non-profit public and 2,941,931 non-profit private education students were not enrolled in any online
courses compared to 558,434 for-profit education students. In short, the Coronavirus affected the no-completely-online-student reputations of both public and private non-profit institutions, and in terms of sheer numbers, the public institutions suffered a much greater reputational blow. But why is this important? Because reputation is closely connected to institutional ranking and prestige: two of the major markers of success in neoliberal acade-mie. And this educational catastrophe may have just significantly deconstructed the validity of both rank and prestige relative to online instruction by bringing all higher education in America—at least for a time—to the same instructional level. Educational catastrophe has significantly diminished the value of one of neoliberal acade-mie’s main measures of success, namely the difference in reputational capital between online and non-online institutions of higher education.

**Classroom Catastrophes**

Tens of millions of students who do not take any online courses forced almost overnight into them was a catastrophic event for higher education. But in some alternate universe, the opposite as well is happening: millions of online-only students are being told by their institution that online instruction is no longer being offered. The contagion here is not a biological one but rather computational: a computer virus has shut down online education in America. Whereas the Coronavirus resulted in all face-to-face courses needing to be put online, the computer virus resulted in all online courses needing to be made face-to-face. If we regard the Coronavirus as resulting in a higher education catastrophe, how should we regard the fictional computer virus? A catastrophe for higher education on the scale of the Coronavirus? Or a miracle on the order of restoring acade-mie to the chalkboard only classrooms of its past? Or something else entirely?

For context, consider that prior to the 1960s, there was no such thing as an online course. Distance education included those correspondence courses noted earlier or courses offered off-campus. My personal favorite of the latter genre of instruction was an introduction to philosophy I taught at a mall in Indianapolis in the late 1980s. It was held in the staff training room of a Sears department store on Saturday mornings, where the smell of freshly baked “Cinnabon” cinnamon rolls made concentrating on Bertrand Russell more difficult than usual. However, distance education by that time was already slowly beginning to change
through the development of computer systems that could be utilized for instructional purposes.

In 1960, the University of Illinois launched Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations (PLATO), the first computer-assisted instruction system in the world. PLATO was an intranet where students could access course materials and listen to recorded lectures. It grew to more than 1000 terminals worldwide in the 1970s and came to offer computer-assisted instruction to University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign students, local schools, and more than a dozen universities in four different decades. Then, in 1983, the Electronic University Network was developed by TeleLearning Systems, Inc. Its aim was to create a highly accessible online educational network. By September 1985, it was reported “Close to 15,000 students are now taking classes and seminars in subjects ranging from economics to the subtleties of California wines. And the number of colleges and universities participating in The Electronic University has topped 1700—all of which offer credit courses through EU.” Participating institutions included Cornell University, Boston University, the State University of New York, the California State University system, and Virginia Tech. To get a sense of what was being offered at the time, consider that in January of 1986, Linda Harasim and Dorothy Smith of the University of Toronto co-taught fully online “Women and Computers in Education.” It dealt with gender issues and educational computing, specifically “gender bias and lack of interest by girl students and women teachers in educational computing.” Harasim goes as far as to claim that this 1986 course was the first fully online course.

Broadly speaking, distance education, that is, courses that were not offered by correspondence, but “primarily delivered using live, interactive audio or videoconferencing, pre-recorded instructional videos, webcasts, CD-ROM or DVD, or computer-based systems delivered over the Internet,” increased rapidly in the new millennium. From 2000 to 2008, undergraduates enrolled in at least one distance education course increased from 8 to 20%, and those in a distance education degree program increased from 2 to 4%.

During this period, many non-profit and for-profit institutions came to offer online education courses, programs, and degrees. Some were prestigious institutions such as Stanford and Harvard Universities (which makes the comedian’s joke above only funny to those who believe that prestigious universities do not engage in online education), whereas others
were not and were regarded by some as little more than “diploma mills.” In the case of Stanford, for example, in 2006, it was possible for students from anywhere in the world to earn a master’s degree in engineering online. Of this online master’s, a student pursuing it from China says, “It was my dream to study in the best engineering school in the world.” “It is a much more prestigious degree than any schools in China,” she concludes.\textsuperscript{13} As of 2020, Stanford now offers eleven Master’s degrees fully online. As for Harvard, they have an Extension School, which offers online courses. In 2013, 13,000 students were enrolled in the Harvard Extension School, with 2000 of them pursuing bachelor’s and master’s degrees. However, it has been reported that since its inception, the Harvard Extension School has only graduated less than one-fifth of one percent of its students.\textsuperscript{14}

Today, roughly one-third of students of higher education engage in at least some online coursework. While only time will tell for certain if the recent Coronavirus catastrophe will push that number higher in the coming years, it is not much of a reach to speculate that it will. But what is the best balance for a university between face-to-face instruction versus online is not easy to determine particularly outside of catastrophic need. My own university is a good example in this regard.

In 2005, about half of the seats in courses in our School of Arts and Sciences were face-to-face and the other half of our seats were online (with face-to-face outpacing online seats by less than 100 seats). However, by the fall of 2019, though our school enrollments had greatly risen (going from about 2500 seats in 2005 to 7000 seats in 2019), the face-to-face versus online enrollment spread in our school remained exactly the same as it was in 2005.\textsuperscript{15} Still, in spite of these fifteen-year enrollment figures, a major concern for our university administration in the opening months of 2020 was how to entice more of our students to take their courses face-to-face rather than online. And then the Coronavirus hit us in mid-March, where we, like most every other university in the United States, put all of our face-to-face courses online. So much then for the immediate plan to increase our face-to-face offerings. The only silver lining here was that most of the faculty were experienced at online instruction so the transition to an all-online curriculum almost overnight was not as catastrophic an event as it would be for a faculty that had \textit{en masse} never taught online. Moreover, as half of our seats were already online, the effects on students too were not as catastrophic as they might be for students at institutions that do not offer any online courses.\textsuperscript{16}
In 2000, I speculated that there would be increasing pressure on faculty by administrators to incorporate computer and information technology into their teaching. I also noted that many faculty at that time feared that the “intervention of computer and information technology in higher education [would] radically change, if not destroy, higher education as we know it though [they disagreed] on whether this [would be] a good thing.”

Sadly enough, twenty years later the same situation obtains: there is deep division in higher education today whether online instruction is the future of higher education or something that must be overcome. The question today is will a catastrophe change our beliefs in this regard?

Twenty years ago, it would have been pure academic fiction to predict that a bio-catastrophe would force all face-to-face higher education to be put online. But not only did this occur, but most all higher education faculty in America were required by their administrations to use computer and information technology to teach the university out of a catastrophe. It would be naïve to believe that this catastrophe has not radically altered the fate of online instruction in the university. The joke that Harvard University is now an “online university” might as well be generalized to all higher education in America. All who taught in higher education during this bio-catastrophe are now as a consequence online faculty and all have now worked at an online university.

What is even more remarkable is that a mere thirty-some years after the Electronic University Network started to widen the reach of computer-mediated instruction and the first full-online courses were being offered for credit by major universities like the University of Toronto—and at a time when it was still normal for courses to be taught by correspondence and on weekends at the mall—the possibility of bricks-and-mortar classrooms becoming the exception rather than the norm in higher education became a reality. While it may have taken a bio-catastrophe to actualize this, it nevertheless occurred—and there is no turning back to the future of bricks-and-mortar as the existential foundation of university instruction. A catastrophe changed it all and has precariously and precipitously pushed us forward into of higher education’s digitally mediated future.

Nevertheless, as someone who has closely followed the demise of both bricks-and-mortar bookstores and the analog book in the new millennium, the recent online reconfiguration of higher education feels like it is a “day late, dollar short.” Since the celebrated 2007 launch of the Kindle Reader and the concurrent rise of Amazon as a major book distributor
(and now publisher), walking into a bookstore to purchase a book or producing one without the aid of digital software or communication is the exception rather the norm in the book business. It is only fitting that it might be a bio-catastrophe that finally pushes higher education into the digital universe that by and large destroyed the bricks-and-mortar world of books.

We now live in a world where catastrophe is the category we would use to describe a computer virus that puts a stop to all online coursework as well as online shopping, online books, online editing, online movies, online banking, online social media, etc. However, twenty years ago this would not have been the case. Sure some folks would have been inconvenienced and many institutions would have been damaged, but few if any would have been destroyed. Today, however, a computer virus is as threatening to our welfare as a contagion like the Coronavirus. If the local brick-and-mortar bookstore or university is shut down, it feels normal to push the functions served in these buildings online. However, if online book shopping is shut down, there are far fewer bricks-and-mortar bookstores than twenty-years ago to serve us in our time of need. Moreover, if online education were to be shut down, even though it currently only serves about one-third of students of higher education, the vast majority of these students do not have the option of going to a bricks-and-mortar building for classes. Why? Because this was one of the primary reasons they took online courses in the first place: educational convenience.

Online education today provides many students the opportunity to pursue higher education and balance other aspects of their life such as work, family, and livelihood. Face-to-face education is not an option for many of them even in catastrophic times. The reverse, however, is not true. Online education serves as a perfect backup plan in times of crisis and catastrophe. Fire, flood, and bio-hazard cannot stop the pursuit of higher education online the way it can bring bricks-and-mortar higher education to a grinding halt. Therefore, today, fiction became reality, and reality became fiction when it comes to catastrophic education: online is a reliable backup to higher education in times of catastrophe, whereas bricks and mortar education is not a very reliable alternative to online education in catastrophic times.

What is most amazing is how the character of catastrophic education has changed over the past twenty years, whereas the general feelings about bricks-and-mortar versus online education have not changed much over the same period of time. In short, while online education is a legitimate
and valuable backup to bricks-and-mortar education, bricks-and-mortar education is not a legitimate and valuable backup to online education. And just think: it only took a catastrophe for us to recognize this.

Catastrophic Trades

Educational catastrophe though is not just about biological and computational contagion. It is also about the economic contagion of neoliberalism in higher education. Unlike biological and computational contagions, which result in catastrophes that are immediately felt—e.g., classes are now going to be online or the network is down so we cannot do our work—the impact of the neoliberal contagion in higher education does not always have an immediate impact. Rather, it works at a more leisurely though no less destructive pace.

Neoliberal academe is a slow catastrophe. And it is no secret now that it has eroded just about every aspect of academic life. Like Rob Nixon’s “slow violence,” which is the unseen and unheard violence that happens on a temporal scale that is beyond the capacities of our senses, the slow catastrophe of neoliberal academe more often than not occurs silently and out of sight. Moreover, while Nixon associates slow violence with “climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnifications, deforestation, the radioactive aftermath of war, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes,” it is also possible to think of the speed of the catastrophe of neoliberalism in the academy in a similar way.18 Borrowing from Nixon, the slow catastrophe of neoliberal academe might be described as a “delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space,” an “attritional” catastrophe that typically would not be regarded as a type of catastrophe.19 Nevertheless, higher education under neoliberalism is catastrophic education par excellence. One way to view its devastating effects on higher education is through the trade-offs that are made by students and professors in order to try to survive in neoliberal academe. For students, this ranges from taking on increasing levels of debt and choosing majors based on their earning potential to feeling compelled to trade in a higher education for some lower version of it.

The higher educational environment under neoliberalism at its worst abhors academic exploration and intellectual self-development as ends in themselves. Rather, the acquisition of knowledge in itself is pushed aside in favor of training of students to be entrepreneurs who can leverage a
minimal skill set into a maximal income. Moreover, neoliberalism creates an environment where the financial costs of higher education are always measured against their earning rather than their educational potential. This leads some to a pernicious form of anti-intellectual and anti-university thinking. According to this neoliberal educational thinking, if a certificate without a bachelor’s degree will earn you as much income in the workplace as a bachelor’s degree, then one should pursue the certification training and forego the pursuit of a college education. The slow catastrophe of students trading off a higher education for a lower one such as certification training though is only one aspect of the devastating effects of neoliberalism on the academy.

For those of us who value literature, one of its greatest catastrophes is the slow violence of neoliberal thinking to its future. This has led many in the humanities to become sincerely worried about the future of literature. It is a nagging worry that only seems to worsen over time. This worry comes not from those who can’t tell the difference between Dante and Dostoevsky. For them, literature is neither an object of affection nor a window to the world. It is a door within the house of knowledge that they cannot bring themselves to open. Rather, the worry mainly comes from those most familiar with literature. For scholars and admirers of literature who have explored its long history dating back thirty-three centuries to the Gilgamesh epic. For them, a most fatal concern has arisen of late: the real possibility of the emergence of a post-literature era.

The worry is not that there will be some massive catastrophe like the fire in ancient Alexandria where vast amounts of literature were lost forever. Future generations will have even greater access to the literature of the world that has been passed down through the millennia. Nor is the worry that there will not be a coterie of scholars who will continue to study it for many years to come. Even the most ardent proponents of a decreased role for literature in the university do not believe that its study will or should disappear entirely. Rather, the worry is that what will happen to the study of literature is what happened to the study of Greek and Latin in the academy. Whereas a century ago, the study of classical languages was the mark of an educated person and a sign of a complete university education, today it is regarded as a non-essential, educational “luxury” item.

Just as the study of Greek and Latin in the twentieth century was an expiring holdover from the nineteenth century, the study of literature might be viewed in the twenty-first century as an expiring holdover
from the twentieth century. Whether it is because literature is linked to an outmoded technology or because there is less sustained reading attention or whatever, there is a strong feeling that literature is being traded out today for something different. We might disagree about the specifics of these trades, but the fact that they are being made with increasing frequency seems obvious to most scholars and admirers of literature.

While some contend that declining interest in the book compared to other technologies of communication such as television, film, and the Internet is linked to the declining future of literature, there are others who lay the blame entirely within the academy. These folks believe that fifty or so years ago the academy began the process of trading literature for theory. Supposedly, there was a time before the linguistic turn when professors and students studied literature, not the structure of language. The legacies of structuralism and poststructuralism brought about a turning away from literature, and replaced it with literary and cultural theory.

Last gasp efforts to purge theory from the university and recuperate literature in its wake such as postcritique and surface reading, which are taken up in Chapter 9, “Catastrophic Theory,” only serve to exacerbate our worries about literature lost rather than quell them. Moreover, finding a new theory to recuperate literature in the academy after it has been effectively marginalized leads some to wrongly assume that theory was the principle cause of the declining value of literature in the academy—and not something else.

It is highly unlikely that “the hermeneutics of suspicion” led students to not want to study literature for nine out ten don’t even know what it is. Students learn about theory through the study of literature and learn about literature through the study of theory. If anything, theory kept literature in the university on life-support for longer than it would have been without it. Rather, academics began the process of trading literature when the university aimed to become a vocational training center. What we traded literature for were all of those other areas of study that allegedly make students better prepared for their vocation and the workforce. Business majors had no business studying Beckett, and Montaigne and Marlow were traded for management and marketing courses. In short, the study of world literature was traded for workforce learning.

Thus, for today’s average student, studying comparative literature is comparable only to seeking the most efficient means of underemployment. And in spite of the impassioned manifestos by earnest and learned
literature professors that the study of literature will get you a better job upon graduation than those who don’t study literature, this is a type of argument that is always born to lose in the neoliberal academy. The rising cost of education is indeed both monetary and intellectual. Students have traded the study of literature for the pursuit of a better future through vocational training.

The balance of trade regarding literature has resulted in a vicious circle where literature is increasingly diminished with each trade-off. Students don’t want to study literature because they believe it is not going to provide them with a secure financial future, and professors don’t want to teach literature because their students don’t want to study it. Few things are more painful for faculty than trying to convince students that their time and money is not being wasted through the study of topics they regard as superfluous.

The rise of the neoliberal vision of the university has decimated its academic ideals and replaced them with the protocols of debt culture and market economics. While it was possible once to make the utilitarian case that studying literature provides the skills needed to be successful in your life and career, this can no longer be achieved. The professional training model of higher education which places a high value on curricular efficiency and educational instrumentality now runs deep in the veins of the public imagination.

To be sure, a trade imbalance regarding literature exists in the university today. It has come about because far too many students, faculty, and administrators have chosen to trade literature and the higher aims of education away. Similar shameful trade-offs too have been made in other areas of the humanities such as philosophy and rhetoric. To trade away work that has been a central part of the academy since its origins in ancient Greece, and literature that dates back even earlier, is ultimately to trade away higher education for a much lower and inferior version.

Perhaps the only way to hide our shame in trading literature for vocational training is to cover it with the fig leaf of post-literature. But what does this mean? Doing so allows us to lay the blame for trading literature in the academy not on neoliberal academe, but rather on the advancements in technology that have resulted in a decrease in the sustained readerly-attention that literature has traditionally demanded. The post-literature world is one where reading attention is not required for the new forms of writing that are emerging in the wake of traditional forms of literature.
The novelist, Robert Coover, describes this post-literature world as one where we “will continue, in whatever medium and with whatever tools, to tell stories, explore paradox, strive for meaning and beauty (those sweet old illusions), pursue self-understanding, seek out the hidden content of the tribal life, and so on—in short, all the grand endeavors we associate with literature, even if what they make may not be literature, any more than film is literature or nature a poem.” This post-literature world is the mirror image of the post-university world, or what we now commonly refer to as the neoliberal academy. The type of educational environment in this neoliberal academy is best described as a catastrophic one.

If the post-literature world is one where we traded literature for something else that nonetheless allows us to continue “all the grand endeavors we associate with literature,” then the neoliberal academy is one where we traded education for something else that nonetheless allows us to continue “all the grand endeavors we associate with education.” Though this is a dark mirror image, it is a fitting one for dark times. More importantly, while it leaves our worries about the future of literature intact, it is a dark mirror image that mitigates at least some of our responsibility as literature professors for the catastrophic educational consequences of trading away our livelihood.

**Of Shame and Sycophants**

But there is still another meaning to covering our shame in trading literature for vocational training by covering it with the fig leaf of post-literature. It is a meaning that does not mitigate our responsibility for the catastrophic educational consequences of this tradeoff and others done under the cover of neoliberal academe. Instead, it places responsibility squarely upon our shoulders as willing participants in the curricular trade economy of neoliberal higher education. This meaning can be traced back to David Hume’s essay “Of the Balance of Trade,” which was first published in 1752. In it, he writes in support of free trade among nations and warns against prohibitions to exporting certain commodities. “It is very usual, in nations ignorant of the nature of commerce,” writes Hume, “to prohibit the exportation of commodities, and to preserve among themselves whatever they think valuable and useful.” “They do not consider, that, in the prohibition, they act directly contrary to their intention; and that the more is exported of any commodity, the more will
be raised at home, of which they themselves will always have the first offer.”28

To illustrate the dangers of prohibiting trade, Hume uses the example of ancient Greek law that prohibited the exportation of figs:

> It is well known to the learned, that the ancient laws of Athens rendered the exportation of figs criminal; that being supposed a species of fruit so excellent in Attica, that the Athenians deemed it too delicious for the palate of any foreigner.29

But the prohibition on fig exportation is only half of the story. The other half concerns the economy and politics of informing on those who exported figs. The Greeks had a specific term for such informers, “sycophant.” Again, Hume:

> And in this ridiculous prohibition they were so much in earnest that informers were thence called sycophants among them, from two Greek words, which signify figs and discoverer.30

Whereas now the term “sycophant” generally refers to a servile self-seeking flatterer, in ancient Greece, the term generally refers to a “public informer”—the Greek counterpart of the Roman “delator.”

While it is a combination of the Greek words for “fig” and “to show,” there is much debate as to the meaning of “sycophant.” For some, the word simply refers to those who inform against others for stealing the fruit of the “sacred” fig tree or exporting it. But for others, because taxes and fines were at one time in ancient Greece paid in wine, oil, and figs, the word “sycophant” refers to those who handed over fines and taxes to the state. Another meaning attributed to the term is as an “obscene gesture of phallic significance” called “showing the fig” directed toward another for some frivolous or trivial reason. On this meaning, the sycophant is the person who initiates the insult. There is also a meaning of the term that connects it to the ancient Greek cult of the Phytalidae, wherein a “sycophant” was an official connected with the cult. Phytalus, the namesake of the cult, was rewarded a fig tree by Demeter in return for the hospitality he provided to the wanderer.

The darkest meaning though from antiquity links the term to those who blackmail others over their “figs” (or money). In this sense, a sycophant is someone who threatens to bring criminal charges against a rich
person, that is, someone with a wealth of figs, unless they pay off the sycophant not to press the criminal charges. In Athens, any citizen could at any time accuse another of a public offense. As those in positions of power and wealth were looked upon with suspicion by the Athenian citizens, many were willing to believe most any charge brought against the rich and powerful. This made wealthy individuals vulnerable to blackmail by sycophants.31

What is interesting is that despite the potential for sycophants to blackmail the rich and the powerful or even to bring false charges against them, they were nonetheless regarded as an essential part of Athenian democracy. Moreover, the profession of sycophant was not regarded as a dishonorable one. The practice of encouraging citizens to help in the detection of crimes against the state was important even if some abused the opportunity for personal gain.

Hume does us a service by reminding us of the historical connection between prohibitions to free trade and sycophants—even if he is critical of such prohibitions calling them “ridiculous” and “errors, one may say, [that are] gross and palpable.”32 The *fig-leaf* of post-literature that we took earlier as one of “shame” for trading literature for vocational training comes to mean through the perspective of Hume on free trade and the Greeks on sycophancy something quite different. It is a meaning that is much darker than “shame” and may be directly linked to the catastrophic consequences of the political economy of neoliberalism.

As participants in the neoliberal university who are concerned about the future of the humanities, we are encouraged to be sycophants in the classical sense. When the university veers from its vocational telos, we are encouraged to report though curricular assessment the deviation. For those who are passionate advocates of literature but cannot link the teaching of literature to the vocational ends of the university, it can be difficult to become a “literature informer” for the neoliberal university. But what else can we do?

Our prohibited goods are not figs but the fruits of the humanities such as literature. The humanities would like to keep them all for themselves and resist exporting them to the professional sides and ends of the academic house. As I’ve argued before, this is not a healthy practice for the economy of the humanities in the age of neoliberal academe.33 Students with vocational aspirations who are careerists are radically altering humanities education in America—and the humanities
curriculum is slowly giving way to their vocational and corporate interests. How then do we meet the demands of these vocationally-motivated students while at the same time resist trading away literature and humanities instruction in our curriculum? This of course is one of the central challenges facing the future of the humanities in the neoliberal university.

To be sure, we cannot and should not ignore or denigrate the desires of our vocationally-directed students. Rather, we need to engage them in a progressive form of dialogue with and through the humanities courses that we do offer. “Vocationalizing” or “corporatizing” humanities courses however does not mean that we ignore the historical and political dimensions of the works that we are teaching, rather it means that we need to be careful not to assume that our students *prima facia* care about the critical foundations of texts or even the fruits of the humanities such as literature and philosophy. Teaching literature courses in this context requires a more complex dialogue between teacher and students in order to respect mutual desires. In the end, however, this respect of different desires may be one of the only ways to prevent the eventual extinction of large swaths of the liberal arts curriculum—especially if our corporate liberal arts courses bring about a greater knowledge of and appreciation for the liberal arts.

The curriculum of the university is a political economy. Prohibiting the free exchange of ideas within the university by prohibiting—or at least discouraging—instruction in key areas human knowledge such as literature, philosophy, and rhetoric will result in catastrophic consequences for the university and the society to which it aims to benefit. Hume’s warning about the Greeks and their figs is analogous to the situation today of the university and literature. Shame turns to fear when the fig leaf is now hiding the decimation of not just the literature but also the catastrophic destruction of the university too. On this bleaker reading of the post-literature world, when we traded literature for vocational training, we did far more than hide our shame with the fig leaf of post-literature. We also became sycophants in the classical sense: namely, literature “informers” in the darkest senses of the classical term. The sycophants of the humanities are a catastrophic consequence of higher education under neoliberalism.

**Catastrophic Resistance**

Catastrophes continuously temper higher education. They can come from outside of academe like the Coronavirus and the various hurricanes that
have closed our universities for varying periods of time. But they can also come from within academe like the catastrophes inflicted upon higher education by mass shootings, privilege, and debt. This book is primarily concerned with catastrophes internal to higher education though the lines between educational catastrophes externally- and internally-induced are fluid as one of their major sources is the international rise of economic and political neoliberalism.34

As an economic and political project, the history of neoliberalism begins in the period between 1978 and 1980, which David Harvey calls “a revolutionary turning-point in the world’s social and economic history.”35 In terms of publicly funded institutions of higher education, the internal impact of neoliberalism on the university is concurrent with these historical origins. Nevertheless, neoliberalism in higher education intensified greatly after the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and came to include private institutions of higher education whose endowments were decimated by the financial crisis. Under these economic and political conditions, the notion of education as a public good that is supported by the state gave way to the practice of higher education being primarily driven by debt and market mechanisms.

As a consequence, student debt has reached epidemic proportions in this neoliberal, or, if you will, “post welfare-state”36 environment, where there has been decreasing state support for public education and increasing privatization through industry. In short, higher education under neoliberalism has become progressively desperate in its search for alternative sources of revenue and has gained a reputation for pursuing just about anything that will bring in revenue. “Under neoliberalism,” writes Henry Giroux, one of its most established critics, “everything either is for sale or is plundered for profit.”37 Naomi Klein adds that this fundamentalist form of capitalism “was written in shocks” because it “has consistently been midwifed by brutal forms of coercion, inflicted on the collective body politic as well as on countless individual bodies.”38 Neoliberalism has become a catastrophe for higher education and the rise of the debt economy has only made this situation worse. How we deal with these ongoing catastrophes in higher education is important, but so too is our preparedness for future educational catastrophes.

While the topic of education and catastrophe does not have as extensive a body of philosophical speculation as say education and democracy, there has nonetheless been some significant work in this area. The locus
classicus of this topic is the subject of Chapter 2, “Education and Catastrophe.” It concerns the efforts of the celebrated science fiction writer H. G. Wells to try to literally “save the world” from catastrophe through the publication of a textbook. The textbook, *The Outline of History* (1919–1920), was his catastrophic educational response to the First World War. For Wells, the guiding thought behind this project is a beautiful one although it is buried 1100 pages into the volume: “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” To a large degree, *Catastrophe and Higher Education* is inspired by the work of Wells even though a century later we are left asking whether higher education is itself a catastrophe, particularly as it manifests itself in neoliberal academe.

Nevertheless, from Wells, the idea that we can use our position as teachers and scholars to turn the tables on social, political, economic, and environmental catastrophe takes root in twentieth-century public imagination. Education, in particular, the publication of works that aim to raise the knowledge level of the general population on topics such as history, philosophy, and science has the potential to save the world from catastrophes like another world war, climate change, and the rise of fascism. Wells though was a writer, not a publisher, so was fairly limited in his ability to encourage other writers to his cause. However, his efforts inspired others to the cause of catastrophic education. One was the publisher Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, who is the subject of Chapter 3, “Little Blue Books.”

In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Haldeman-Julius built a publishing empire through the sale of “Little Blue Books” that came to be distributed and read all over the world. Haldeman-Julius regarded his mission in life was to educate the masses through the publication of cheap classics as well as books on just about every subject imaginable. Not only would these “Little Blue Books” revolutionize the publishing industry, because he sold 500 million copies of them, he is regarded as the greatest publisher in world history. Among the many authors he published were Bertrand Russell and Will Durant, whose works together did more in the twentieth century to introduce philosophy to a mass audience than any other authors in the twentieth century. Wells, along with Haldeman-Julius, Russell, and Durant, shared the common belief that education is our best defense against catastrophe. Haldeman-Julius recognized that not only must work that appeals to the general population in key areas of knowledge such as history, literature, philosophy, and science
be published, but it must be available at a cost that will not prohibit its purchase by a mass audience of varying economic means.

Chapter 4, “All Publishers are Equal,” provides a millennial twist on the catastrophic educational dreams of Wells and Haldeman-Julius. Whereas in the twentieth century, publishers were still regarded as the gatekeepers of knowledge because publishing decisions were relative to their interests, in the twenty-first century, the rise of self-publishing has radically reduced the role of gatekeepers in the publishing world. Moreover, because self-publishing now dwarfs traditional publishing in terms of numbers of individual works published yearly, we might ask now whether the role of publishing with regard to catastrophe has also changed. Is the rise of self-publishing an opportunity for education to wage a more effective fight against catastrophe? Or is self-publishing itself an educational catastrophe because the loss of gatekeepers entails the loss of product control?

While self-publishing offers the prospect of equal access to the publishing process in the name of the public good, something that Wells and Haldeman-Julius surely would have championed, it at the same time deconstructs the notion of privilege in publishing. In terms of higher education, this has the effect of creating a false positive though regarding changes in the role of privilege in the academy. Chapter 5, “Academic Privilege,” examines the role of privilege in higher education. Like the doors of the publishing world, which are clearly marked in terms of privilege, the doors of higher education are also marked by privilege. The difference, however, is that while the publishing world is making strides to be a place where privilege and over-privilege are not produced and reproduced, higher education is not. The structural condition of higher education under neoliberalism objectifies prestige, and prestige in higher education is tantamount to privilege. Privilege is an educational catastrophe that continues to reproduce itself under neoliberalism in spite of the desire of many in the academy to eliminate it.

Educational catastrophes like academic privilege that are structurally reproduced over generations are further intensified when coupled with neoliberalism. This is most explicitly seen in relation to the dramatic rise in student debt in the new millennium, which was already noted. Of all of the catastrophes that have impacted higher education, student debt is the one that most clearly reveals the destructive connection between public policy influenced by neoliberal economics and student moral life. Chapter 6, “The End of Morality,” shows how one of the cornerstones of
Western morality, the principle that we all must repay our debts, threatens to be obviated by student debt resistance. The educational catastrophe of student debt places its victims in a difficult moral position: reject Western morality through debt refusal or risk being straddled for the rest of your life with student debt. Educational catastrophe here doubles when students are asked to choose between two evils, namely, catastrophic debt or ending morality.

Whereas academic privilege and student debt are both urgent catastrophes facing higher education today, neither was precipitated by anything like the events of September 11, 2001 when planes struck the Pentagon and the Twin Towers. While the new millennium brought much fear that there would be a massive computer crash that would bring down the global economic market, there was as little concern that a computer failure would bring down online education across the country as their was that an act of terrorism would bring down the Twin Towers. Consequently, the catastrophe of the events of September 11, 2001 was intensified by both their immediacy and unexpectedness.

In Chapter 7, “Post-Literature America,” it is argued that the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001 led the United States into a new literary age characterized by fear and capital driving our social, political, and intellectual agendas. But the consequences of this new literary age are not just in relation to the future of literature in America. They are also in relation to the hopes of Wells and Haldeman-Julius that ignorance can be battled through education. Ralph Waldo Emerson though, who said that “Fear always springs from ignorance,” perhaps is a better guide to post-9/11 America than the dreams and hopes of Wells and Haldeman-Julius. The new millennium has become an age characterized by ignorance and capital where higher education might turn out to be one of our greatest catastrophes.

Many of course recognize that the university is in peril and that the future of the humanities is uncertain. However, there is much debate as to how to deal with the dual-catastrophes of higher education and the humanities. My own argument has been that neoliberalism in higher education is a bad thing and that unless we move beyond extreme free market capitalism as the determinate of higher education policy, the future of both higher education and the humanities are in serious jeopardy. But recent events within the humanities have led me to an even darker conclusion. Namely, that in the process of trying to cope with the neoliberal assault on higher education, a number of humanities scholars have
come to argue against the most effective means we have at our disposal to fight back against and resist neoliberalism: critique.

In Chapters 8, 9, and 10, the internal assault by humanities scholars against the very weapons that can be used to battle neoliberal academe are examined. Chapter 8, “A Century of Antitheory,” looks back for context on our current situation to the late philosophy of William James, which vehemently fought for philosophy and theory amid fierce scientific opposition to it. Drawing upon the work of James, it is argued that the best way to destroy the humanities and the academy is to become an antitheorist who categorically rejects theory. This is shown to be a counter-narrative to contemporary antitheorists who claim that they are doing the very opposite, that is, by rejecting theory they are saving both the humanities and the academy.

By contrast, Chapter 9, “Catastrophic Theory,” takes a much shorter-view by closely examining three recent versions of antitheory: radical aestheticism, object-oriented ontology, and postcritique. It is argued that whereas the last quarter of the twentieth century was one of the most vibrant periods in the history of the humanities, the first quarter of the twenty-first is increasingly becoming one of its most reactionary. The reactionary nature of radical aestheticism, speculative realism, and postcritique is most obvious in its strong affiliations with aspects of the New Criticism, which dominated mid-twentieth century literature studies. Together, Chapters 8 and 9 reveal that the greatest threats to the future of the humanities may come from within its ranks, rather than from without. To describe these threats as the actions of sycophants seems only appropriate given our earlier discussion of Hume. In short, antitheory is itself catastrophic in its aim to diminish theory, particularly theory that is used in the fight against neoliberalism.

Finally, in Chapter 10, “Pessimistic Education,” postcritique is presented as a life-denying approach to the humanities in particular, and the university in general. A case is made for this by calling upon the philosophical and critical work of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom were philosophical pessimists. Critique, and along with it theory, provides us with the best chance of both resisting neoliberal academe and saving the humanities from demise. Moreover, as critique is a life-affirming, optimistic approach to both the humanities and the university, it is preferable to the life-denying and pessimistic alternative provided by postcritique.
**Conclusion**

Education is no less immune to catastrophe than any other area of life. A student who fails all of their courses because they are grieving the loss of a loved one, and another who drops out of school because they are in love, are both educational catastrophes. So too is a teacher who becomes obsessed with their research and as a result neglects their students, friends, and family. And, to be sure, schools that fail to educate their students or that have a large proportion of them drop out are also educational catastrophes.

There are of course many other examples of educational catastrophes like the ones described above. Sudden educational calamities through accident, sickness, misfortune, and misbehavior are commonplace in education. Some are small and common like failing to turn in an assignment because one forgot to do it. Others are large and less common like dropping out of school because one needs to get a job to provide for ones family.

On these terms, then, catastrophe is a regular, if not everyday, element of the world of education. Disaster takes many different forms in individual student and teacher life, and “sudden calamities” are a part of the everyday world of education from grade school through the university. To examine education through the lens of catastrophes both small and great is to see one of the ways in which education “fails.” Students failing courses, teachers failing to teach, and schools failing to educate are all subspecies of the general term, “educational catastrophe.” To be sure, there is no doubt that the daily pursuit of education is fraught with catastrophe.

But, is education also subject to the kind of catastrophes usually only reserved for the earth such as earthquakes, eruptions, and floods? The question here is less one of the possibility that catastrophe is a component of education than one of the upper limits of its degree or scale. On a micro-scale, educational catastrophes are commonplace, but on a macro-scale what does “educational catastrophe” mean? The international Coronavirus, which hopefully will be as common as 1000 year floods, has given the world a sense of the upper limits of catastrophe in higher education. But given what Klein calls the “shock doctrine” of disaster capitalism, more large-scale catastrophes are surely on tap in higher education’s future.

*Catastrophe and Higher Education* asks what it means to live in a higher educational world continuously tempered by catastrophe. Are
there opportunities for education to fight back against catastrophe? Or is a catastrophic educational world essentially one without hope for resistance? *Catastrophe and Higher Education* argues that many of the resources for response and resistance such as publishing, philosophy, and theory have long been identified by thinkers ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James to H. G. Wells and Emanuel Haldeman-Julius.

*Catastrophe and Higher Education* shows that both hope and resistance are possible *if* we are willing to not succumb to a form of pessimism that always already appears to be drawing us into its arms. From the natural threats of biological and ecological catastrophes to the institutional fears instilled by terrorism and neoliberalism, higher education faces catastrophe now on a regular basis. The fate of the academy may very well be in the hands of humanities scholars who are tasked with either rejecting theory and philosophy in times of catastrophe—or embracing it.

The future of the humanities is tied to the fate of theory as a form of resistance to neoliberalism in higher education. Higher education will truly be a catastrophe if we reject theory. However, there is still hope for higher education against catastrophe if only we allow critique to continue to be utilized in the fight against neoliberal academe.

**Notes**

1. The University of London’s “External Programme,” which began in 1859 and continues to this day ([https://London.ac.uk/ways-study/distance-learning](https://London.ac.uk/ways-study/distance-learning)), is widely credited as the first university in the world to offer full degrees through distance learning. In the United States, “The Society to Encourage Studies at Home” was founded in 1873 by Anna Eliot Ticknor. It was the first correspondence school in the United States. See, *The Ticknor Society* ([ticknor.org](http://ticknor.org)) for information on Ticknor and her contributions to distance education.

2. On January 4, 1887, Peirce wrote to Henry Cabot Lodge:

   I have quite a reputation for my knowledge of the logic and methods of science. I have worked out a long series of practical exercises to teach the whole art of reason from beginning to end. There are throughout the country thousands of young men and women to whom these lessons would be of more real service than almost anything they could study.

   The question is, first, how many of them I could teach? Now I have planned a system which I won’t trouble you with, with
passages written out answering every conceivable difficulty in the whole course, type-writers and assistants ... by which I can write say 500 letters a day, or take charge of 1500 students. I propose to charge $30 in advance for 30 lessons, the entire course being about 200.

Peirce was asking Lodge for support money for this correspondence teaching venture, which ultimately only resulted in a handful of students. Lodge’s letter is cited by Joseph Brent in *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 183.

3. Ryan Craig, “A Brief History (and Future) of Online Degrees,” *Forbes*, June 23, 2015. www.forbes.com/sites/ryancraig/2015/06/23/a-brief-history-and-future-of-online-degrees/#ac1556048d9a.

4. See Jeffrey R. Di Leo, *Modern Literature and the Other Arts: A Learning Guide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Independent Study Program, 1995); Jeffrey R. Di Leo and John Musselman, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Learning Guide* Guide (Bloomington: Indiana University Independent Study Program, 1996; revised ed., 1999); and Jeffrey R. Di Leo and John Musselman, *Elementary Ethics: A Learning Guide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Independent Study Program, 1997; revised ed., 1999).

5. For some time, however, I did not know that the student whose work I was grading was in prison or that it was the same person as the murderer. The address on the correspondence I received was an apartment in Hollywood, California. However, I read in a popular magazine that this Beverly Hills murderer was taking correspondence courses, and quickly figured out that this was my student. Many conversations with my colleagues at the Georgia Institute of Technology, where I was teaching at the time, followed this disclosure, which helped me to process the uniqueness of this pedagogical situation.

6. Jimmy Fallon, “Opening Monologue,” *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, Season 7, Episode 99, March 10, 2020.

7. These numbers come from Doug Lederman, “Online Education Ascends,” *Inside Higher Ed.*, November 7, 2018. www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2018/11/07/new-data-online-enrollments-grow-and-share-overall-enrollment.

8. For the importance of rank and prestige in neoliberal academe, see Jeffrey R. Di Leo, *Corporate Humanities in Higher Education: Moving Beyond the Neoliberal Academy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 71–88.
9. It will be very interesting to check back on this topic in a few years. However, right now, there is just not enough information to speculate on the long-term consequences of the “online leveling of higher education.”

10. Sharon Darling, *Compute*, September 1985. Reported by Cait Etherington, “What Happened to the Electronic University Network?,” January 9, 2018. https://news.elearninginside.com/what-happened-to-the-electronic-university-network/.

11. Nevertheless, Harasim acknowledges, “It’s always dangerous to be the first in anything,” and welcomes feedback from others on early pioneering online courses. She also notes that Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff at New Jersey Institute of Technology had run blended courses since the early 1970s. Harasim’s comments are found at “Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the First Fully Online Course,” January 17, 2016. www.tonybates.ca/2016/01/17/celebrating-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-first-fully-online-course/. See also Linda Harasim, *Learning Theory and Online Technologies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

12. Alexandria Walton Radford, “Learning at a Distance: Undergraduate Enrollment in Distance Education Courses and Degree Programs,” U.S. Department of Education, October 2011. NCES 2012-154. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012154.pdf.

13. Lisa M. Krieger, “Get a Master’s at Stanford, Without Going to the Farm,” *San Jose Mercury News*, November 21, 2006. The student who is quoted is Bing Ma, a finance director at a Beijing-based U.S. company.

14. Theodore R. Johnson, “Did I Really Go to Harvard If I Got My Degree Taking Online Classes,” *The Atlantic*, September 16, 2013.

15. The consistency rate of this spread was not the product of academic “planning,” but rather the result of responding to student demand regarding desired mode of instruction.

16. Regardless of the quality of these converted courses, some students feel that as consumers of an educational “product,” they were “short-changed” by the conversion of face-to-face courses. They are saying that they purchased face-to-face instruction, not online, so therefore want a “refund” for these courses. The question of the “return policy” on education is a fair topic for the age of neoliberal academe where courses are viewed as commodities that are sold to students. In such a setting, “defective” education can be returned for a full
refund. See Greta Anderson, “Feeling Shortchanged,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 13, 2020. www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/13/students-say-online-classes-arent-what-they-paid.

17. Jeffrey R. Di Leo, “New Technology and the Dilemmas of the Posttheory Generation: On the Use and Abuse of Computer and Information Technology in Higher Education Today,” in *Day Late, Dollar Short: The Next Generation and the New Academy*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 130.

18. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

19. Ibid., 2.

20. See Robert Coover, “The End of Literature,” in *Experimental Literature: A Collection of Statements*, eds. Jeffrey R. Di Leo and Warren Motte (Aurora, IL: JEF Books/Depth Charge Publishing, 2018).

21. A good source for variations on the position that the rise of theory in the academy is to blame for the decreasing position of literature in the academy is Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, eds., *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). For a variety of responses to this position, see my edited collection, *What’s Wrong with Antitheory?* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

22. For a development of postcritique, see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), and for surface reading, see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21. For statements about how these positions exacerbate our worries about literature lost rather than quell them, again, see my edited collection, *What’s Wrong with Antitheory?*

23. In his book, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), Paul Ricouer proposed two general directions for interpretation. One direction seeks to “purify discourse of its excrescences, liquidate the idols, go from drunkenness to sobriety, realize our state of poverty once and for all” (27). The other direction “use[s] the most ‘nihilistic,’ destructive, iconoclastic movement so as to *let speak* what once, what each time, was *said*, when meaning appeared anew, when meaning was its fullest” (27). For Ricouer, all textual interpretation is “animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience,” a “tension” and “extreme polarity” that is the “truest expression of our ‘modernity’” (27). One direction he calls the “school of reminiscence” and the other the “school of suspicion” (32). If the aim of the school of reminiscence is the *restoration* of meaning, then the aim of its opposite, the school of suspicion, is the *demystification* of meaning. For Ricouer, the three “masters” that dominate the school of suspicion are Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (32). Though their lines of thought are “seemingly mutually exclusive,”
“[a]ll three begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering” (34). Thus, for Ricouer, “the Genealogy of Morals in Nietzsche’s sense, the theory of ideologies in the Marxist sense, and the theory of ideals and illusions in Freud’s sense represent three convergent procedures of demystification” (34). See Chapter 9, “Catastrophic Theory,” for a discussion of postcritique’s challenge to the hermeneutics of suspicion.

24. On the neoliberal crusade in higher education to reduce the pursuit of knowledge in favor of an increase in vocational training, see my Corporate Humanities.

25. See Jeffrey R. Di Leo, Corporate Humanities; Jeffrey R. Di Leo, Higher Education Under Late Capitalism: Identity, Conduct, and the Neoliberal Condition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and Jeffrey R. Di Leo, Peter Hitchcock and Sophia McClennen, eds., The Debt Age (New York: Routledge, 2018).

26. Robert Coover, “The End of Literature,” 257.

27. David Hume, “Of the Balance of Trade,” in Essays: Literary, Moral, and Political (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd, 1894), 184.

28. Ibid., 184.

29. Ibid., 184.

30. Ibid., 184. Hume cites Plutarch’s De Curiositate (On Being a Busybody) as his source here on figs and sycophants in ancient Greece.

31. The best source for the various meaning of “sycophant” is the entry on the term in the eleventh edition of The Encyclopedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature, and General Information Literature, and General Information (1911).

32. David Hume, “Of the Balance of Trade,” 184.

33. See Jeffrey R. Di Leo, Corporate Humanities, 1–12.

34. As an economic and political project, the history of neoliberalism begins in the period between 1978 and 1980, which David Harvey calls “a revolutionary turning-point in the world’s social and economic history” (A Brief History of Neoliberalism [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005], 1). In terms of publicly funded institutions of higher education, the internal impact of neoliberalism on the university is concurrent with these historical origins. Nevertheless, neoliberalism in higher education intensified greatly after the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and came to include private institutions of higher education whose endowments were decimated by the financial crisis.

35. David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.

36. The phrase “post welfare-state” was introduced by Jeffrey J. Williams in his review essay, “The Post-Welfare State University,” American Literary History 18.1 (Spring 2006): 190–216.
37. Henry Giroux, *The Terror of Neoliberalism: Authoritarianism and the Eclipse of Democracy* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), xii.

38. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 18–19. Of the term “neoliberalism,” Klein notes that while it is used and recognized worldwide, the terms “free trade” and “globalization” are often used interchangeably with it (14). Her thesis and evidence that extreme neoliberal policies often follow collective shocks is powerful testimony to the pattern of its destructive power. For disaster capitalism in public education, see, for example, Kenneth J. Saltman, *Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

39. H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind*, 3rd ed. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1921), 1100.

40. This argument is made most explicitly and forcefully in *Corporate Humanities in Higher Education*. 