Spotless Minds and Cultural Memory: 
Teaching Future Teachers in the United States

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Introduction

THOSE OF US who train future high school English teachers in the United States have been pondering what changes, if any, we should make to our curriculum or classroom delivery in response to the Common Core State Standards Initiative. With forty-five states engaged in this overhaul, including Ohio where I teach, the consequences of adopting the Common Core are manifesting themselves most notably in the suggested reading material for high school students. Not only do the standards place more emphasis on nonfictional, or so-called “informational” texts, than was previously the case; the list of text exemplars for 9–12 English Language Arts omits any mention of eighteenth-century British literature (“Appendix B” 9-13). The Common Core creators state that the exemplars “expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list,” but one wonders how high school teachers will fit Swift, Pope, or Defoe, let alone any other authors from our period, into a curriculum whose emphasis is shifting away, or in many cases has already shifted, from broad knowledge of historical periods. I am not naïve enough to think that exposing our future teachers to the eighteenth century will inspire them to devote weeks of the curriculum to it, especially given new expectations in the standards. I have, however, become more mindful of the utility of my upper-level eighteenth-century literature class for the teachers in training.

In this essay I offer a lesson from such a course that is grounded in utility but animated by fundamental questions of the humanities. The lesson asks students to understand Pope’s *Eloisa to Abelard* on its own terms and then to read it in concert with the 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, written by Charlie Kaufman and directed by Michel Gondry. Introducing a film that is not a direct adaptation of a literary text, I have found as I have taught this pairing, allows for an exploration of the
themes and concepts of the poem without the distraction of considering whether it is a “faithful” adaptation. Refracting Pope’s text through Eternal Sunshine sharpens students’ critical faculties with a seemingly more accessible text. Placing this exercise early in the semester gives the students confidence with the material, with evidence of Pope’s continued relevance to our culture opening them up to the other eighteenth-century texts on the syllabus. Regardless of whether the future teachers teach Eloisa to their high school students, they become familiarized with poetic technique, allusion, and intertextuality, as well as some ways to approach the standards in the “Integration of Knowledge” category of the Common Core—in particular, “Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” and “Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take” (“Common Core” 35). The following discussion offers ideas for classroom conversations and essay questions on the synergy of these two texts.

Mary Svevo as Eloisa: Allusion and Dissolution

To summarize the film briefly, Eternal Sunshine begins with the romantic leads Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) and Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) on a train coming from Montauk, NY, seemingly meeting for the first time. We find out that they do, however, know each other and were even in a two-year relationship, but they fail to recognize each other because they had their memories of the relationship erased by a company called Lacuna, Inc. after a bitter confrontation. Most of the film centers on Joel’s attempt to cling to the memory of Clementine during his memory erasure, ending with the lovers recovering their memories in the “real world,” sorting through their history, and giving their relationship another try.

The starting point for my class’s engagement with the film does not concern these romantic leads, though, but rather the explicit quotation of Pope’s Eloisa by a character in one of the secondary plot lines, a Lacuna receptionist named Mary Svevo (Kirsten Dunst). During Joel’s memory erasing procedure, she is invited by her boyfriend, Lacuna technician Stan (Mark Ruffalo) over to Joel’s apartment. During their shenanigans, Joel’s procedure runs into problems so complicated that they need to call Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson), the founder of Lacuna, in order to fix them. This clip comes when Mary is watching Howard intervene in Joel’s memory erasure. Mary asks Howard if he likes “quotes,” and after offering one from Nietzsche on forgetfulness, she recites the following lines:

How happy is the blameless Vestal’s lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sun-shine of the spotless mind!
Each pray’r accepted, and each wish resign’d (207–10)

After Howard praises the beauty of Pope’s poetry, she looks over at Joel’s immobilized body and says that she thought that it would be “appropriate,” connecting the supposedly positive message of the quotation with the joys of memory erasure that she assumes Joel will experience. Readers of Pope and viewers of the film understand the irony of Mary’s double misinterpretation in this particular scene, but is Pope’s presence in Eternal Sunshine significant enough to justify teaching the entire film, rather than brief clips, in an eighteenth-century literature class?

Charlie Kaufman signaled his fascination with the Heloise and Abelard story before in Being John Malkovich (1999), in which the thwarted lovers figure in a brief street puppet show. Kaufman has never revealed a deep knowledge of Pope’s version, nor has he ever parsed the lines from Eloisa to Abelard quoted in Eternal Sunshine in interviews or other venues. In an interview with the Orlando Sentinel, Kaufman explains, “It’s a poem from Heloise to Abelard, and Heloise is a person I’ve been interested in for quite some time now. . . . I came across this passage serendipitously. . . . Her story, her letters, are very beautiful to me” (“Eternal Mystery”). The very point of Kaufman’s serendipity makes for productive class discussion about the transmission of stories and authorial intentions. Should we avoid exploring intertextuality because the author has not given us a golden key to the work? Our class discussions therefore revolve around how the texts that transmit the Heloise/Abelard narrative are not locked up in such a way as to necessitate one point of entry.

To return to the question of teaching the entire film, doing so has the virtue of allowing for several character arcs in Eternal Sunshine to be compared with Eloisa’s own psychological journey. As a class we examine Mary, Clementine, and Joel as Eloisa figures. These rough starting points allow for larger structural and thematic comparisons to emerge in the course of the discussion. Comparing Mary to Eloisa exposes the power relationships at the inception of each affair: Mary looks up to her boss Howard for his intellect, though he is not a teacher like Abelard in the strictest sense. This scene and others in the film show how highly Mary regards him as a scientist and thinker. We consider the Howard/Mary relationship when we read descriptions of what was originally a student/teacher relationship:

Guiltless I gaz’d; heav’n listen’d while you sung;
And truths divine came mended from that tongue.
From lips like those what precept fail’d to move?
Too soon they taught me ’twas no sin to love. (65–68)

These statements are echoed in the film by Mary’s comment to Howard, “I love to watch you work,” and elsewhere when she refers to him in almost godlike terms. Mary’s passive spectatorship differs from the historical Heloise’s intellectual equality.
with Abelard and turns our attention back to Eloisa’s own display of intellect. One intriguing question to pose to students is whether Pope downplays or emphasizes Eloisa’s scholarly achievements in the epistle. With reference to her letters and some historical background, our class then judges what constitutes a display of knowledge and intellect, especially because Pope’s rendering of a feminine voice focuses primarily on Eloisa’s emotions.

We consider whether Pope endows Eloisa with a philosophical albeit claustrophobic voice, one that continually spirals back to desire for Abelard and considers everything within its terms. We take into account R. D. S. Jack’s claim that Pope “restores to Eloisa her intellect” from the version of the Heloise and Abelard story available to him, John Hughes’s 1717 translation, notably through her handling of theological concepts (207). Valerie Rumbold calls Hughes’s work “a translation indirectly derived from the medieval origin via a seventeenth-century French reworking [that] had given the subject an almost impenetrable gloss of romance and sensationalism” (159). We may question whether Pope writes out the woman’s brain in favor of her heart from reading the poem on its own, but for students who may more readily identify with Mary, seeing that self-erasure of accomplishment at the foot of the “great man” (after transposing Pope’s name, “Pope Alexander,” she refers to herself as a “dope”) can drive the point home and give them a historical context for the persistence of or resistance to female self-abnegation.

Mary’s reference to the “spotless mind” is ironic primarily because of what happened to her before her own memory was erased, challenging both the blankness and purity suggested by the phrase: Howard had erased her memories of their illicit liaison through the Lacuna procedure. But her character’s confession of love during Joel’s erasure suggests the persistence of memory as an “emotional core,” something that Howard explains earlier to Joel in his Lacuna office. Her mind is not spotless because her feelings well up in his presence, and of course the word “vestal” alludes to the Vestal Virgins, which could only ironically be compared to the sexually liberated Mary. The fact that her memories of Howard were erased does not erase the fact that they crossed an ethical line in a work relationship, engaging in the even deeper transgression of an extramarital affair. Assigning blame or blamelessness to her character is complicated and makes for good class debate.

The representation of female desire and its moral/ethical dimensions does as well, especially given that most of our majors are women. On the subject of a gendered or sex-based response, Pope’s attempt at representing a “woman’s voice” leads to examining assumptions about what constitutes such a voice. Howard’s voice in the film projects reason and science, but his deception of Mary recalls Eloisa’s description of Abelard’s own rhetorical prowess: “truths divine came mended from that tongue” (66). Both R. D. S. Jack and Katherine Quinsey read “mend” ambiguously to suggest, in part, convenient adaptation of what should be a purer rendering of God’s law (210–11; 409). Although Howard and Abelard both modify
the codes of their professions to suit their own desires, Howard escapes with fewer consequences. Howard’s humiliation in front of his wife and employees—not to mention the blow to his credibility through Mary’s exposure of Lacuna’s practices—could be read as a kind of castration, but its severity pales in comparison to the literal castration forced on Abelard by Heloise’s relatives.

In addition to these gender-based concerns, the titular quotation helps our class discussion reach toward some larger concerns about context, interpretation, and structure. Todd McGowan recognizes a parallel between Mary’s penchant for quoting from Bartlett’s and the Lacuna procedure: “The book of quotations reproduces lines that might mean the opposite of what they seem to mean in isolation; memory erasure causes traumas to repeat rather than eliminating them” (257, n. 21). McGowan maintains that the flaw in the Lacuna procedure is that, “[l]ike Eloisa, subjects remain attached to the traumas of the past, even when the procedure allows for their repression. The fundamental error behind the procedure lies in its utter inability to acknowledge the unconscious” (102). The structural integrity of the mind, as the film argues, prevents the extraction of isolated memories, despite how thoroughly the Lacuna process promises to map its neural networks. McGowan refers to Mary’s “misinterpretation” as an “analogue for the Lacuna procedure itself,” but I suggest that we may term it an allegory of (mis)reading as well (102). Because Mary’s recitation of the “blameless vestal” lines out of context distorts their meaning, I emphasize how vigilant students must be when quoting, or reading a quotation out of context, especially with the proliferation of internet “quote” pages that are significantly less curated than Bartlett’s and often wildly inaccurate. Mary never indicates that she knows the source text of the quotation, let alone the significance of the speaker or the dramatic situation of the poem.

Beyond this scene, Mary is important to the broader context of the film as a whole as a generator of narrative, not quite in the vein of Abelard’s provocative letter, but nonetheless important for discussing what propels a story. After discovering that her own memory had been erased, she raids the Lacuna archives of clients’ cassette tapes detailing the painful memories they sought to have erased, with Joel and Clementine receiving theirs in the mail during their second try (unbeknownst to them) at love. Her action forces the lovers to choose to move forward or move on. Joel and Clementine decide, tentatively, to continue the relationship, leaving their ultimate fate open at the story’s close. The main questions left with the audience are how keenly they will feel the burden of the past and how they will overcome some of their basic incompatibilities. We can confirm the historical Heloise’s fate, but Eloisa’s narrative cannot be said to be resolved at the end of the poem. She invites Abelard to preside over last rites at her deathbed, imagines Abelard’s death, envisions hypothetical visitors to their shared grave, and speculates on the poet who will tell their tale. Both Eternal Sunshine and Eloisa prompt reflection on literary endings—what characters and narrators do and say to provide closure or openness.
Joel Barish as Eloisa: Phantoms and Mindscapes

Although Mary is a minor character in *Eternal Sunshine*, she is laden with the titular line and intervenes in the narrative’s resolution. Joel, however, is the main character of the film, which emanates primarily from his point of view. We do, after all, spend most of *Eternal Sunshine* inside his head. So, while Joel might be the least likely Eloisa figure, his quest to hold on to memories in spite of Clementine’s forced separation raises this possibility, at least as the film is aligned with his perspective, as he yearns, and in some ways mourns, for his lost love. Pope’s explicit presence in the film is through brief quotation but is implicitly felt in the representation of the mind as a landscape and the memory as series of cinematic vignettes. Students may therefore be invited to compare the space of Joel’s mind with the spaces in *Eloisa*. Joel’s mind roves through versions of his childhood home, his current apartment, Clementine’s apartment, and other various locations in the New York metropolitan area, all mediated through the filter of his perspective and the encroaching peril of memory erasure. Eloisa is confined to the “awful cells” of the Paraclete, as well as mental constraints that she constructs for herself throughout the poem (1). Eloisa’s line “And round thy phantom glue my clasping arms” takes on added significance when we are viewing scenes of Joel trying to cling to Clementine’s body within his memory, only to have her vanish before his mind’s eye; as Eloisa envisions, “I stretch my empty arms; it glides away” (234, 238).

It is worth mentioning, for the purposes of close reading the scene in which Mary recites Pope’s lines, that the camera cuts from Mary to one of Joel’s memories of a street parade of elephants and other circus animals. Mary is essentially providing a voice over to this scene, which involves Joel mimicking one of the elephants and Clementine exclaiming, “I wanna be a great, big, huge elephant, with a big huge trunk like that!” and then vanishing from Joel’s memory. The irony hits home for students as I ask them to describe the emotional core of this memory, let alone Kirsten Dunst’s delivery of the Eloisa excerpt, complete with non-diegetic keyboard and acoustic guitar accompaniment bordering on the sentimental, in contrast to the meaning of the lines within the context of the poem as well as the larger context of the film. However, to complicate that irony a bit, this very memory is an isolated bright spot in a relationship full of dysfunction. Joel is pining for this version of Clementine who is “eternally spotless” to some degree, cordoned off from her impulsivity, heavy drinking, and moodiness. The seeming resolution of the film does show Joel making peace with Clementine’s difficult personality; however, because the memories isolated by Lacuna for erasure were selected by the client, the elephant parade held a special—and particularly happy—place in Joel’s mythos of Clementine.
Clementine Kruczynski as Eloisa: Manic Panic and Peace of Mind

In *Eternal Sunshine*, we are exposed quite briefly to the actual character Clementine because Joel’s mediated version of her is before us for the better part of the film. In Joel’s memory of asking out Clementine during her book store shift, she warns him, “I’m just a fucked-up girl who’s looking for my own peace of mind. Don’t assign me yours.” *Eloisa to Abelard* represents Eloisa’s singular perspective such that it may be difficult to find similarities between Clementine and Eloisa beyond the fact that they are both women, given that we lack meaningful access to Clementine’s point of view. Asking students whether Eloisa is “just a fucked-up girl looking for [her] own peace of mind” can be a provocative way to reframe the purpose of Pope’s poem. I had not considered the comparison seriously until a student wrote a creative yet analytical comparison-contrast essay. Framing the paper around Clementine’s shocking Manic Panic hair colors—green, red, orange, and blue—the writer analyzed the changing shades as transition points in Clementine’s character development, even adding the flourish of printing the paper in different colored inks to match up with the four colors. The student writer drew an analogy between the shifting hues and the ways in which Eloisa redefines herself and shifts emotional registers throughout the poem.

Considering Eloisa in light of Clementine stresses the passionate and volatile aspect of the medieval nun; Clementine’s sexual liberation contrasts with Eloisa’s celibacy but harmonizes with the frank eroticism of Eloisa’s dream (225–48). Although the “phantom” mentioned above in relation to Joel’s yearning refers to Abelard’s imagined illicit embraces, Clementine does have her own version of this phantom. Her subconscious wells up in the presence of the Lacuna technician Patrick, who fell in love with her during her own memory erasure and is trying to stand in for Joel, armed with the relationship artifacts that Lacuna clients surrender before their procedures. Joel does not appear within the frame of the film in the way that Clementine does during Joel’s Lacuna procedure, but the memory of his part in their love affair leaves traces with the audience, provoking a similar sense of unease when Patrick tries to recreate Joel and Clementine’s night on the frozen Charles river.

Our Very Own Lacuna: The Phantom Eighteenth Century

As I have taught this pairing several times, and as I have worked on preparing future high school teachers, the lesson has inevitably pushed me to consider the nature of memory beyond the worlds of *Eloisa* and *Eternal Sunshine*. Although these texts focus on individual memory loss and recurrence, I am tempted to allegorize *Eternal Sunshine* as a *cri de coeur* for the willed forgetting of culture on all levels of the
curriculum. Or, to be slightly less dramatic, we may use the main themes of the film as jumping off points for such nonetheless urgent discussions. Students enter my eighteenth-century literature course, the only course in our English curriculum on the British eighteenth century, with little knowledge of the period. It is rare that a student has already read one of the texts on my fairly standard syllabus, a mixture of novels, poetry, and drama. Students are coming to my courses with an eighteenth-century lacuna, presenting me with an opportunity at once exhilarating and burdensome. Because of their traditional gap in preparation, they are open to the subject, unbound by specific prejudice (general prejudice against older literature being another matter). On the other hand, I realize that I have one shot at sparking their passion for the eighteenth century, and that the experience that the Integrated Language Arts education majors have in my class will determine, in part, whether they will teach the subject in their own classrooms.

The lacunae that I detect in my students are not self-imposed, however, and are hardly the result of a soured love affair with the eighteenth-century. Although the intentional memory gaps that Lacuna customers seek in *Eternal Sunshine* are meant to aid their healing from trauma, our forgetting of the British eighteenth century would seem to result, rather simply, from the choices forced by information overload. As time passes, more authors write and more voices are (rightfully) included in curricula. As such a sweeping curriculum initiative is in progress, the time is ripe for reminding our future high school teachers how vital our period is to an understanding of literary history. I find that I have to persuade future teachers that they need to know about the eighteenth century even if they are not going to require their high school students to read extensively in the period. If they have to choose between *Eloisa* or a different poem to fulfill a particular learning or testing outcome in their own classrooms, why should they choose Pope? With staggering student debt and the attendant possibility of lifelong financial instability for our future teachers, we need to take seriously this idea of use value that is increasingly bred in our students, who are themselves products of the teach-to-the-test mentality that they are slated to replicate.

The Common Core does not preclude the teaching of eighteenth-century British literature by any means, but its omission in the textual exemplars is symptomatic of the cultural forgetting that we need to work to erase. In order to stanch the flow of forgetting, we need to justify our existence continually and with fervor, especially those of us teaching in small programs where we are often the lone faculty member teaching the eighteenth century. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* provides such an avenue for exploring the kinds of formal complexity and thematic intricacies that characterize eighteenth-century texts in addition to the content links that I explained earlier. It leads the class to appreciate eighteenth-century texts better, and it can tip the scale enough toward appreciating and even loving the “well-sung woes” of Eloisa and the body of literature that we do. Todd McGowan writes of *Eternal Sunshine*, “By freeing us—or attempting to free us—from the past, the Lacuna
procedure stands in for postmodernity itself. In the postmodern era, historical memory fades” (97). Perhaps the most persuasive reason for teaching the eighteenth century on all levels of the curriculum is not utilitarian at all, but rather one that appeals to the enduring value of the humanities. *Eloisa*, for example, provides an opportunity to practice interpretive skills on a challenging text, but is this rather anemic reasoning going to convince future teachers that eighteenth-century British literature must hold a place in the curriculum? We should communicate in their language of outcomes and standards, but ensure that, with *Eloisa*, we dwell on the question of why painful memories are necessary and even good, how pain is a part of being human, and how *Eloisa* works through these persistent questions distinctively, stressing how this work is not interchangeable with another. Teaching *Eternal Sunshine* and *Eloisa* together in no way solves the problem of the phantom eighteenth-century in the high school curriculum; however, whether we consider ourselves to be in or beyond the “postmodern era” we need to stay on guard, lest the future of our subject dissolve in our desperately grasping arms.

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NOTES

1 *Pride and Prejudice*, often counted in the “long” eighteenth century, is included in the Grade 11 “Stories” category (11). Joan Dash’s *The Longitude Prize* is recommended for Grade 9 to 10 “Informational Texts: History / Social Studies,” and Joy Hakim’s *The Story of Science: Newton at the Center* is suggested for Grade 9 to 10 “Informational Texts: Science, Math, and Technical Subjects” (11).


3 See Anne Carson’s “Exquisite Torture” for elaboration on the erotic elements of the poem.

WORKS CITED


