In the Middle

peace love & the middle ages

Wednesday, December 18, 2013

This is Not My (or, Our) Time, so Please Take Ecstasy With Me: The Necessity of Generous Reading

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for Jeffrey Cohen, Michael O'Rourke, and Karl Steel, scholars-in-arms
and also for Carolyn Dinshaw

As we navigate the ruins of [Bill] Readings’ university without condition and transgress the cross-hatches of disciplinary boundaries, we answer to a duty -- as Derrida reminds us, a responsibility to listen to others while subjecting ourselves to encounters with otherness. This is ongoing work however, because, as [Claude] Romano explains, “an encounter is not so much a ‘presentation’ (of two people) as a futurition. It has meaning only through the possibilities that it holds in reserve, which give it its future-loading.” These encounters are beginnings that never end because they “constantly defer” themselves by “opening ceaseless new possibilities.” Rain is, as Jeffrey Cohen [has] brought home to us so beautifully [in his recent work] . . . “a going-from,” but as we go, we should be willing to take no end of risks.

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The intimacy with an unknown body is the revelation of . . . distance at the very moment we appear to be crossing an uncrossable interval. Otherness, unlocatable within differences that can be known and enumerated, is made concrete in the eroticized touching of a body without attributes. A non-masochistic jouissance (one that owes nothing to the death drive) is the sign of the nameless, identity-free contact with an object I do not know and certainly do not love and which has, unknowingly, agreed to be momentarily the incarnated shock of otherness. In that moment we relate to that which transcends all relations.

-Leo Bersani, “Sociability and Cruising”

For a long time now, I have been thinking about what I am going to call -- for lack of a better phrase at present -- generous reading. It’s this (utopic) (foolish) idea I have that, within the humanities and the university more broadly, we might actually devise a way to read the work of others -- even those we might disagree with for all sorts of reasons, or from whom we might feel disciplinarily (and otherwise) estranged -- with some sort of spirit of radical openness to what others are desiring to think and articulate at any given moment. I say quite purposefully -- desiring to think and articulate -- because I believe we put too
little of a premium within our professional academic lives on actually caring about other persons' intellectual wishes and desires (what does he, she, they, want? what are they TRYING to say/do? what do they need from me?), and instead often approach others' work primarily from the route of how we think we might be able to utilize the "end products" of that work (positively or negatively) in our own scholarship, which scholarship (moreover) is often conceptualized along fairly narrow theoretical, methodological, temporal, disciplinary and other lines (for the important sake of "expertise," this is sometimes, and valuably, necessary). Let me clarify before proceeding so that it does not seem as if I am claiming that most of us supposedly work within overly "narrow" intellectual and other concerns and interests. I do not believe that and would like to further believe that most of us are on the lookout most of the time for new ideas, and new provocations to thought; it's just that, given the constraints of our lives (teaching schedules, personal lives, disciplinary boundaries that are not always easy to cross, and various other stresses and pressures), the amount of time we have to simply read other scholars' work simply for the purpose of answering the (hopefully) joyous question -- "I wonder what THIS is about?" -- feels (or maybe really is) unavailable.

So, for practical reasons (and I am, or have been, as guilty of this as anyone), we often read books and articles, etc. that we have vetted ahead of time to be 'relevant' to whatever it is we are working on at any given moment. In addition, we often read these materials with an eye toward how they will aid or possibly hinder certain ideas and arguments we have already settled upon, and if we are open to being diverted from our (somewhat) settled notions, it is not without some discomfort that we change direction(s). Don't get me wrong (again) -- I think most of us welcome new ideas and new trajectories of thinking in our various fields of research (as spurs, especially, to deeper and more complex modes of reflection on our chosen subjects), but the willingness to be completely (100%) unpered in our intellectual investments and most cherished frameworks of thought is another matter entirely. There is also simply the matter of what it might mean to simply ENJOY, or even just to value for their own sake, the projects of others, even when they have nothing to do with our own projects, or might even be at cross-purposes with them. That is why I feel compelled to write this. Because sometimes I -- I mean we -- forget what it means to just wander into a museum, or a library, or a lecture, or a classroom, or an office, or a bar, or someone's living room, or a park (etc.), without pre-arranged intentions, and with some sort of radical commitment to the surprise of a, or the, stranger.

Because, you see, I actually believe that it should be the purpose of the humanities, especially, to foster and cultivate such enjoyment (which has no slight relation to "discipline"), and such radical hospitality, which is itself a call for more work to be created that would (and might) be enjoyed for its own sake (as opposed to: for your sake, or for the sake of your most cherished coterie of scholar-companions, or for the sake of your favored methodological approaches, etc.). I am mindful here of Richard Kearney's recent work on "anatheism" (brought to my attention by Cary Howie) where he argues that poetics, and more importantly, the poetical "as if," plays a crucial role in clearing "a landing site for the divine stranger." Anatheism is about clearing a space for the "divine stranger." This is the site of a radical hospitality to an Otherness that, when it arrives, might bring you flowers, or flaming arrows, but as a gesture that has agreed to loosen its grip on a too narrowly-imagined telos, the clearing of this site enacts an ethos of what I will call foolish generosity (or felicitous receptivity) that not only desires an encounter with the contingent and the fortuitous, but also believes that, without such clearings, we are left with an impoverished ontological imaginary, without which we will find it difficult to summon the inner resources necessary to, in a sense, loan ourselves out to others -- in short, to care about anything at all (and one hopes that the University would be a site of such care, of ourselves and others' edulaimona, or flourishing, especially as recently formulated in Aranye Fradenburg et alia's book Staying Alive). As Jane Bennett puts it in The Enchantment of Modern Life, the work of rendering oneself more open to the surprise of other selves and other bodies and of being "willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with the presumpive generosity" -- it is an ethos that "emerges in conjunction with a picture of the world as a web of lively and mobile matter-forms of varying degrees of complexity.

And yet, much of modern life -- and of academic life, especially -- seems to be built upon the negotiation of various antagonistic differences that are not ever overcome (or positively ameliorated) so much as they are "tolerated" and/or are constantly pushed against. This is how Les Bersani puts it in "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject":

Negotiating difference has been the dominant relational mode in our culture. Such negotiations have primarily consisted in attempts to overcome or destroy difference or, at best, to tolerate it. Our most liberal injunction has been: learn to communicate (or pretend to communicate) with a world where differences practically guarantee failed communications. We have yet to elaborate the concrete steps (in education, in politics, in the practice of sociability, in the organization of living spaces) that might help to erase the hegemony of this relational regime and institute a relationality grounded in correspondences, in our at-homeness in the world's being.

What Bersani means by our "at-homeness in the world's being" is that (if only we could better see/feel this!), instead of thinking about the ways in which various "identities" populate the world (and thus also always striving to position ourselves in relation to these "identities," some seen as friendly, others as more threatening -- this is, in a sense, the foundation of all violence and war), we might, rather, grope our way toward a vision of the world as a "solidarity" of "positionings and configurations in space" -- a world, moreover, in which all of us are "inaccurately replicated everywhere" -- and thus difference is "not a trauma to be overcome," but is instead "the nontreating supplement to sameness" ("Against Monogamy"). For Bersani, the one realm that reveals and displays this world better than any other is art itself (painting, film, the novel, etc.), because it gives us a model of the world as world, one we 'know' as aesthetic subjects.
Nothing is more absurd, Freud asserts in Civilization and Its Discontents, than what is perhaps the most cherished biblical commandment: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' This commandment, revered as 'one of the ideal demands' of civilised society, is 'really justified by the fact that nothing else runs so strongly counter to the original nature of man,' which Freud claims, dictates not that we love our neighbours, but rather that we exploit them, rape them, rob them, murder them.

-Léo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, "One Big Soul"

What would happen, then (Bersani asks), if we replaced the jouissance of always wanting to repress and overcome difference (think Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents and also Lacan's writing on that work, where the greatest pleasure comes from enjoying another's, and even our own, destruction) with the pleasure of finding ourselves "harbored" within that very same difference? Does this mean we all just slip away into some sort of groovy energy of being awash in the "forms" of other persons and other persons' thoughts (even when those persons and their ideas might really feel "blegh" to us)? Not necessarily (and let's be clear right now that I am not encouraging people to jump into toxic lakes or to go dancing with neo-Nazi skinheads, so please shelve those objections now). But Bersani's question is important to me, personally, because I find that I have grown really weary of scholarship (and public intellectual debate) that is intent on either destroying/negating its supposed 'opposition' and/or, at the very least, would like to make the case that the work that SOMEONE ELSE is doing is useless, not worthy of consideration, and maybe even (gasp?) harmful to the overall health and vigor of intellectual life itself (and these are all forms of debate, moreover, where nothing more is at stake than how to read Hamlet, or how to theorize the Middle Ages, or whether or not objects are always withdrawn or in relation with other objects, or whether or not the proper approach to the past is through invested affect or cool-headed rigor, etc.).

Let me reiterate (and I will do so, repeatedly, throughout this post), that I am not against disagreement or dissensus -- indeed, the health of any polis depends on it, and we can recall here the important lesson taught by Frederick Douglass:

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. The want the ocean without the roar of its many waters.

We must have disagreement and ideas can only move forward when they are tested against other, contrary ideas; I think we will have general agreement on this, but what I am wondering about now is whether or not these disagreements -- especially within the realm of the humanities, and the university more largely -- might not be couched and practiced within more generous frames of approach to others' work and with the (hopefully, as Bill Readings argued in The University in Ruins, to raise the question of what being-together means, but not in any sort of conventional, traditional "community"-based way. Indeed, for Readings (and also for me), we cannot continue to cling to the post-Enlightenment idea of the University as a shared endeavour (as opposed to the site of a continual, competitive arogen) means that, at the exact moment that the public University is under pretty concerted siege by corporate, governmental, and other interests, we have decided to value individual achievement (or the achievement of one particular methodology or field) over the future of the University as a collectively-held institution and "public trust" (perhaps the last one where it is still possible (and necessary), as Bill Readings argued in The University in Ruins, to raise the question of what being-together means, but not in any sort of conventional, traditional "community"-based way. Indeed, for Readings (and also for me), we cannot continue to cling to the post-Enlightenment idea of the University as mirroring some sort of ideal, rational community. There is rather something else we should be doing, and yet (paradoxically) it still requires some sort of "together-ness" (for WE are doing it, however incommensurately). Readings' argument is subtle and worth parsing out further for my own purposes here:

This claim for an ideal community in the University still exerts its power, despite its glaring inaccuracy -- evident to anyone who ever sat on a faculty committee. I argue that we should recognize that the loss of the University's cultural function [as a model of rational community, a microcosm of the pure form of the public sphere] opens up a space in which it is possible to think of community otherwise, without recourse to notions of unity, consensus, and communication. At this point, the University becomes no longer a model of the ideal society but rather a place where the impossibility of such models can be thought -- practically thought, rather than thought under ideal conditions. Here the University loses its privileged status as the model of society and does not regain it by becoming the absence of such models. Rather, the University becomes one site among others where the question of being-together is raised, raised with an urgency that proceeds from the absence of the institutional forms (such as the nation-state), which have historically served to mask that question for the past three centuries or so.

So we will agree that agreeing is impossible -- it is not even the point, and shouldn't be, for dissensus is productive -- but we might commit ourselves nevertheless to this "community otherwise." This will entail various forms of self-disinterested generosity and a radical listening to and for the Other in order to see what happens, not when my or your thought, "trumps" anyone else's, but instead, what happens when we tip over into another's world, and then, well, just anything could happen. This is also a model of responsibility to others -- we take responsibility for the possibility of each other's thought and work. (And I suppose, I have to admit here, too, that for my own career -- such as it is, whatever that is -- I favor a methodology of "getting lost" in other persons' thought and I'm not so interested -- again, personally -- in the model of tensive academic discourse, being more the type who likes, again, to disappear into others' thinking, to groovily dissolve into Otherness, and thus I am more of an "amour fou" academic, and that's just me.) This speaks, then, as well, to Readings' argument for, not a University made up of disciplines, but a
"shifting disciplinary structure that holds open the question of where and how thoughts fit together." This is also to remember Foucault's challenge, in "The Order of Discourse," that we do not yet have a theory that would enable us "to think the relations between chance and thought."

There are so many examples of the sort of combative (and even aggressive) scholarship and public-intellectual blustering that I could provide, and I think many of us are very familiar with the genre without having to provide an exhaustive bibliography. But one needs some cases where we academics love our examples, after all, and it is only fair to provide them. I could gesture to the many exchanges that have erupted in the blogosphere, but also in more conventional print media, over the past several years, relative to various trajectories of thought within Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Speculative Realism (SR) and all of its associated off-shoots -- these are schools (or, more properly speaking, strains) of thought that would appear to make a lot of people so uncomfortable that it is not out of the ordinary to hear their proponents (figures such as Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton, for example) being accused of being less than sincere in their intellectual commitments (as if they were embracing some sort of fog-speak just because it's good for their careers; it should be noted, at the same time, that the dogmatic and even highly-stylized nature of some of these very same thinkers' own writings leave them wide open to vigorous, and at times, rancorous counter-critique -- for myself, 'this style is not a problem; indeed, it makes their work more interesting and frankly, more generative of more thought').

More recently, one might consult Nathan Brown's recent review of Timothy Morton's Realist Magic in *Parrhesia*, in which Brown is both sympathetic to portions of Harman's work while also raising a vigorous polemic against the work which follows in its "foggy" wake, such as Morton's book, viewed as a text from which one cannot hope to learn anything at all. Jon Cogburn's blog-response to Brown's review, "How Not to Engage With Other Humanists," raises some interesting and valuable concerns about the dangers of "policing" other people's thinking, but because he mistakenly believes Nathan Brown to be a philosophy professor (he is, in fact, a professor of English), the entire critique falls apart because it is predicated on the argument that philosophers, in general, are not generous to literary theorists (especially within the context of the history of the whole Continental/analytic split within Philosophy as a discipline).

Interestingly, both Nathan Brown and Jon Cogburn have scholarly and intellectual commitments to thinking through some of these new post-Continental and realist philosophers, and thus it is hoped that: 1) Nathan Brown might not just automatically assume that Timothy Morton is a fraud, doing what he does only because it is "popular," and somehow very knowingly so, and 2) Jon Cogburn would also read Nathan Brown more sympathetically in terms of who he really is and where he is coming from in his critique of Morton's work. It *is in the charges that other scholars somehow have bad motives in their work that I am most concerned.

In this vein, one could also point to Alexander Galloway's essay in Critical Inquiry earlier this year, "The Poverty of Philosophy and Post-Fordism," where Galloway argues that recent strands of philosophical realism somehow "ventrilouize the current industrial arrangement," have no real relation to or alignment with material history (and are therefore amoral and "dangerous" and even falsely 'materialist'), and that "there is little to differentiate the new philosophical realism from the most austere forms of capitalist realism," and therefore these new modes of realist thinking are "politically retrograde." Part of the problem with Galloway's argument is the assumption that SR and OOO (and even Actor-Network Theory) flatten everything out in their ontologies such that all objects are just as "meaningless" or "absolute" as every other object, which is a real distortion of the work that has been done by figures such as Jane Bennett, Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, Bruno Latour, and others. So the real problem here, for me, is not whether or not Galloway is "on board" with Object-Oriented Ontology (he certainly does not need to be and it might also be interesting, and helpful, for the so-called 'new realists' to have pointed out to them the ways in which various strains of OOO thinking might dovetail, and in worrisome ways, with certain "industrial arrangements") -- the larger problem is the accusation of amorality along with the misrepresentation of what these thinkers are actually doing and saying, because to lift some of their thought out of its larger (always more rich and complex and never commensurate) contexts serves the purpose of Galloway's astutely conceptualized (and thus elegant, but still distorted) argument.

It has to be admitted as well that this lack of generosity in reading others' work comes from all corners and that some within SR and OOO are just as ungenerous in their assessment of others' work (Morton on Laurelle, for example, or Harman and Latour on postmodern European theory, where they seriously misrepresent the so-called "linguistic turn," etc.). Again, let us PLEASE have disagreement, but maybe with the willingness not to shave off the parts of other persons' work that don't serve your rhetorical purposes and also with some sort of minimal-threshold understanding that other scholars do not wake up in the morning and, over their coffee and toast, declare, "today I will hoodwink everyone with my flim-flam fog-machine in order to get more plenary talk invitations." Every scholar, no matter what their primary subject matter (OOO, SR, Laurelle, queer studies, feminism, etc.), have passions as well as real intellectual commitments guided by those passions, and please do not try to separate the two (our "work" and our "desires" -- our secret, inner lives, which are inchoate, like our writings -- cannot be separated, and to try to do so is an act of violence, against ourselves and against others). We do not take our own work lightly (and what else do we have, alongside this work, other than our relationships, with each other, with other others, etc.) and we risk much in the making of this work for no real material rewards whatsoever -- can we not grant this reality to others as well (or do professional and other jealousies and fears and insecurities, and the lack of enough footholds within the university for everyone who wants one of those, mean that we always have to assume bad motives on the part of others whose work is, somehow, gaining ground, or going in a different direction than we want to go)?

Within medieval studies, I have personally been dismayed at invectives that have been leveled against: 1) affective approaches to the study of the past, 2) the supposedly "wrong" kind of [supposedly too self-knowingly fashionable and therefore not-smart] theory, and 3) the newer "materialisms" (such as OOO). It dismayed me to say that two names in particular crop up here -- D. Vance Smith and Andrew Cole -- more
specifically, in their pieces (written separately and together),


I should begin by saying that the scholarly oeuvre of both of these scholars is quite formidable and that I admire both of them for their writing and mastery of their subjects (which are richly various). Indeed, when I was in graduate school, one of my most cherished essays, that I read many times over, was Smith’s “Irregular Histories: Forgetting Ourselves,” published in a special issue of *New Literary History* in 1997 that Smith edited with Michael Uebel, which issue also comprised really important seminal theoretical essays in medieval studies by Jeffrey Cohen, Steven Kruger, Aranye Fradenburg, Robert Clark + Claire Sponsler, and Sarah Stanbury, among others. This issue, in fact, was one of the chief influences upon the formation of the journal *postmedieval*, and Myra Seaman and I said as much in our prospectus for that journal when we first founded it in 2009.

Having said that, however, my reading, over the past several years, of the three above-cited pieces, has given me no little sense of discomfort and dismay, NOT because I do not agree with Smith and Cole as they present their views in these essays -- I do not need to agree, and I value disagreement (it has certainly helped my own work when others have pushed me to, as they say, “think again”) -- but because of: 1) the negative (and even self-satisfied) tone of dismissal of others’ work -- which work, moreover, is not always represented fully enough in all of its original complexity, and which is then also regarded, _outside of its most full context_, as either not worth considering/pursuing at all and/or as possibly even being “dangerous” (and given that a university should foster all forms of inquiry, even when they ‘fail’, this bothers me and snags of the sort of gate-keeping I think we should work vigorously to overthrow); 2) what I would call bad-faith assumptions that are made regarding the motives (or supposed bad motives) of these essays’ critical targets; and 3) the ways in which all three of these pieces, in different ways, assume there is always a _better_ way to do theory within medieval studies, as opposed to assuming that we need a multiplicity -- if even an unruly and not-fully-rational multiplicity -- of theoretical approaches to our studies, even if those are not, nor can ever be, commensurate with each other (I will note here that Bruce Holsinger has a critique of Object-Oriented Ontology in the same issue of *minnesota review* that models a much more fully engaged and generous critique, to which Harman also responded HERE, calling Holsinger's criticism 'warm and positive'). I urge everyone who has not read these pieces already to do so (if you are so inclined) and to not necessarily take my word without first judging for yourself what I am going to say next, for I am not going to offer synopses of any of these pieces (as regards #2, such has already been done by Kathleen Biddick and Aranye Fradenburg, for example, in _The Medieval Review and Studies in the Age of Chaucer_, respectively).

It is always good to put one’s cards on the table, to be as honest as possible, even if that means risking embarrassment (in academia, it seems, many like to play their cards “close to the vest,” but I am giving that up, for good), and so I will say that -- whether this is obvious or not, to some -- that I have personal and professional investments in the objects of critique of all 3 of these essays (to wit, affective approaches to the past, postmodern medievalism studies, and object-oriented ontologies), so that definitely colors my responses to them. One could say I am predisposed to be uncharitable in advance to these pieces. It’s important to admit our personal and other investments, because sometimes: _critique hurts_. This isn’t really about the work as much as it is about the persons attached to the work, the persons who make the work. Which is why, to be honest (again), when I read Smith’s “Application of Thought” essay and realized he was, in a rather clever (respectful, yet at the same time harshly critical) way, dissing the work of Carolyn Dinshaw (more precisely, her book *Getting Medieval*), a part of me was, like, “no, you dih’unt!” Cause I love her work. _WORD_. This is my way of saying that, of course, I initially resist anyone critiquing my so-called intellectual heroes, but I am also willing to step back and say, “hang on a minute, maybe there are some reasons we should be cautious when employing affective approaches to the past,” and Smith’s essay is richly instructive on this point. BUT, his essay is not content to just point out the possible limitations of work on affect within medieval studies (which cautions might then better instruct those of us who wish to pursue these approaches). Instead, he has to go further and say that some medieval scholars’ desire for “relevance has come at a cost of a creeping anti-intellectualism” (there is that uncharitable idea, again, that some scholars do what they do so they can be ‘hip,’ as if their intellectual commitments are shallow and cravenly opportunistic), and in the work of certain scholars, such as Dinshaw, who are interested, especially, in self-reflexivity, affect, and the haptic in relation to crafting new historiographical methodologies, Smith worries further that, although Dinshaw’s work possesses scholarly “rigor,” its style and method is ultimately “uninstructive” (because a “scrupulous adherence” to its call for the importance of incommensurability would render imitation impossible, as if that would be the point of following in Dinshaw’s footsteps, anyways).

What Smith is really concerned about, it appears, is that “the danger of valuing affect so highly is that doing so attributes to it an epistemological and even ontological difference so radical as to exclude other categories of representation—that is, to deny these other categories the difference necessary to their work of identification and representation.” As _if feeling has to be opposed to, or forecloses, thinking_ (when in fact there is no such thing as thinking that is not also feeling). And further, “the installment of affect as an historiographical mode” might even be “insidious,” _a_ product, ultimately, of our own “self-interest” and “narcissism.” But who says this is exactly the case—that affect’s epistemological and ontological difference

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is so “radical” that it excludes other categories of representation? Certainly not Dinshaw, nor, really, any of us who work on affect, the haptic, queer historiographical modes, etc. (it should be pointed out that the work of Nicholas Watson also comes under scrutiny in this review essay, and that the “creeping anti-intellectualism” that supposedly infects/harms medieval studies in the 21st century, due to some scholars’ desires for “relevance” at the cost of, I guess, intelligence, is attached to a lot of other scholars’ work whose names are, for better or worse, not mentioned directly). Regardless, these are the words that hang in the air after reading such a review: creeping anti-intellectualism, insidious, self-interest, narcissism. What brought the critic -- -- -- -- D. Vance Smith -- to such a judgment? Does he think so little of those who labor beside him in medieval studies, or does he feel the necessity of enacting a pedagogical correction to his fellow scholars, a little tonic for what ails them? Can he not simply point out what he sees as the possible theoretical and other quagmires of the affective approaches to the past without also impugning the people who take up these approaches in their work? Are they, or their methods, really so “insidious”? Are there good reasons (I can’t think of many) to limit thought in this way? Is the “application of thought,” “then, some sort of reverse amplificatio,” where we cut and hone and whittle ourselves (and our minds) down to the bone of some sort of pure rational thinking, shorn of its many bodies? Thinking, as neuroscience has shown, is always embodied. And I think we risk much when we try to evade that fact.

As regards the other two pieces -- the Introduction to Cole and Smith’s The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages and Cole’s critique of object-oriented ontologies, I will just highlight two small moments -- small, but nevertheless reflective of what might be called the critically severe tendencies of both pieces. In their Introduction, “Outside Modernity,” which essentially makes the claim that the history of theory in the 20th century is not really complete unless one takes into account the Heideggerian, Hegelian and Marxist traditions that have both contributed to the ‘making’ of modernity (as a historical-theoretical concept) and have also been entangled, in various (and important) ways, with medieval thought and culture (and who would argue with this? not me), they also argue that those within medieval studies who are interested in critical temporaity studies (Dinshaw again comes under harsh scrutiny here) are engaged in studies that are simply not worthwhile if they don’t take these German traditions into account because they are more interested in “affirm[ing] the novelty of this or that new methodology” -- so once again we have the idea here that some scholars are just interested in things that are shiny and new, even if they might also be stupid. More troubling though, for me, is the idea that there is only one way -- only one set of trade routes -- by which to trace the history of the development of theory in the modern era. So, you either trace it through Marx, Hegel, and Heiddeger and in contradistinction to Hans Blumenberg (etc.), or you must not be doing it right. ‘Modernity,’ of course, has many different landing-places, many different points of entry, and also of definition, struggles over definition, and redefinition. Why not craft an argument that certain routes to historicizing the development of theory in modernity have been overlooked, but this does not necessarily make every other historicization posed thus far inadequate? Would our field not be better served by the idea that all of us, from various routes, are building this history together, and that it isn’t just -- and can’t be -- one approach or the other? Nor is there even one, totalizing history: I thought we rejected this idea a long time ago as rightfully oppressive.

Related to this sort of sweeping (dismissive) gesture, in his essay in minnesota review, “The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies,” I am not so much concerned with Cole’s cautious concerns regarding the claims of OOO and other “new materialist” - “vitalist” - ANT (Actor-Network Theory), etc. theorists such as Graham Harman, Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour (Harman himself responded generously HERE), and I also think some of his cautions have already been laudably advanced by scholars such as Liza Blake, Juliet Fleming, Nicola Masciandaro, and Kellie Robertson, among others (so he is not alone within premodern studies in raising critical concerns). What concerns me more is his statement at the end of his essay, that,

critiques of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism, of actor-network theory and vitalism, have yet to emerge from the field of medieval studies, apart from the essays collected in this issue of minnesota review. Perhaps when the thrill of object-oriented ontology wanes in this field, some medievalists will not limit themselves to the “application” of its ideas and the mimicking of its lyricism in the reading of medieval texts and will instead show what it means for a new philosophy to be built almost entirely on the exclusion of the Middle Ages.

Interestingly, Cole himself invokes the idea of “generous reading” just after this, in order to admirably urge those new materialisms (go HERE, HERE, HERE, and HERE, for several such examples, but there are many more, including THIS, not to mention like a gadjillion blog posts and conference presentations he could have accessed, read and cited, but chose not to, perhaps because those media do not have the proper scholarly ‘cred.’). But Cole is obviously, from his remarks cited above, aware that medievalists have been working on these new trajectories of thought, and he does not believe they (and who does? again?) are not critical enough, as they are under some sort of ‘thrill/thrall’ in which they have (supposedly) lost their critical faculties due to their (one imagines, unscholarly) desires to “mimick” the “lyricism” of these new writings (and we’re to be on our guard against lyricism, which is to say, poetic?). First, which work, more specifically, is he referring to? He doesn’t say, and therein lies the rub. This is not only not generous on his part; it is also underhanded and slightly less than honest, a sort of bully-tactic in which the so-called ‘victims’ of his attack have no recourse to respond. There can thus be no dialogue, no conversation . . . no approach, no drawing-near, no solidarity of any sort, however dissensual.

“Take ecstasy with me” . . . becomes a request to stand out of time together, to resist the stultifying temporality and time that is not ours, that is saturated with violence both visceral and emotional.
Where do we do from here? How about if you go your way, and I go mine, but we somehow do this in solidarity? I want to call everyone’s attention to an extraordinary blog post (to which Julie Orrénskali first alerted me) by Chris Taylor, a young Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago, “Going My Way”, in which Chris worries that, “Our impulse to critique, and our conversion of critique into mere criticism, is fucking us up. Sometimes I feel like we’ve imported modes of cultural critique subtended by a hermeneutics of suspicion into our relations with one another with the effect that we listen to one another to hear why we shouldn’t listen to one another.” Further, he writes, or I should he say, he proposes,

It begins with a question, one rarely asked and so rarely responded to. Neither articulated nor answered, the question persists as an inchoate feeling for and vague orientation toward another. If we were to give voice to this question, to make it explicit, we would thematize the mystery of this orientation, this feeling-for-another that puts us in hesitant proximity with one another. The question might be phrased as “Going my way?” What this question inaugurates through its inarticulation is the astonishingly robust and ridiculously fragile collectivity that we are, whoever we are. In not asking this question explicitly, we refuse to ask it once and once only, we refuse to thematize a foundational orientation that would determine, once and for all, who we are. We’re not a party, no arche or nomos secures to us our identity as ourselves, and in refusing to ground our collectivity through an inaugural determination of who we are and what we want, we commit ourselves to the tense and uncertain work of feeling toward and with one another. We are nothing but the uncertain feeling that we’re oriented toward one another in our orientations toward something else. That we’re inclined toward one another in the multiplicity of our inclinations.

The decision to repair instead of reject, to treat as flawed friend rather than infallibly flawed enemy, to (re)produce a fraying relation instead of developing an allergy, is ultimately organized by fictions of intention, sincerity, possibility, and so on. We feel that we’re inclined toward one another, that we’re going the same way, and this basic affect/orientation makes non-allergic critique both possible and necessary. We imagine we’re going the same way even if we sometimes decline from one another or swerve away into terrible things. We survive through these fictions. We live on them and through them for the simple reason that we are all too wounded by this world to not carry fucked-up-ness with us in ways we can’t even know without the rigorous, critical, sustaining, and enriching help of our revolutionary friends.

We might also admit -- especially those of us who work within historical studies -- that not only are we all going in different directions (not all of them necessarily good, rational -- but oh god is “rational” over-valued -- useful, productive, etc.), but that we never inhabit the same time, and that even when we talk of time, of specific temporalities, specific locations in time, specific periods, etc., that none of these times are our time. Our time is a different time altogether -- one that we make together as we wend in different directions, in and out of each other’s work (and lives) that may, or may not be, always hospitable to us and our own proclivities of thought (and feeling). We sometimes forget that we can also choose our own time, a lesson perhaps taught to us in the work of José Esteban Muñoz, who tragically departed from us, too soon, on the 4th of this month, and who wrote in his book Cruising Utopia, that “the here and now is a prison house,” and that we must “strive, in the face of a here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel the then and there.” For Muñoz, queerness, especially, was an “insistence on potentiality” or the “concrete possibility of another world.”

Might we work better, then, on behalf of this potentiality and another world -- not just for ourselves, personally, but for each other? I, then, would work on your potentiality, and you, why, you would work on mine. Here, there would be plenty of disagreeing about all sorts of things, but there would be no aggressively competitive agon in which, in order for my ideas to succeed, your ideas have to be smashed by my sleekly-designed hammer (the shattering of which ideas would give me a certain thrill). For I am so tired, so weary, of all the ways in which people within the University -- for reasons of selfishness, insecurity, small-mindedness, whathaveyou -- either stand in the ways of others’ desires to accomplish something, or do not lend a hand to help those who are striving to add something to the world, rather than to subtract things. This is not to say that there would be no agony, no difficult striving, no pain, no struggle.

Indeed, although the book is not yet in my hands, it appears that Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s new book, Sex, or the Unbearable, admirably performs this very dialogic struggle, as they explain in their Preface:

\[
\text{Sex, or the Unbearable is . . . an experiment in the forms of theoretical production. It proceeds from the belief that dialogue may permit a powerful approach to negativity, since dialogue has some of the risk and excitement we confront in the intimate encounter. Not for nothing does the OED list “communication” and “conversation” as the primary meanings of intercourse. In its dialogic structure, then, this book takes shape as collaboration, argument, and exploration at once. It belongs to an experimental genre in which theory, politics, and close textual analysis encounter the pedagogical necessity of responding to the provocations of otherness. Dialogue commits us to grappling with negativity, nonsovereignty, and social relation not only as abstract concepts but also as the substance and condition of our responses--and our responsibilities--to each other.}
\]

Again, this idea of responsibility -- that we have some responsibility for the development of each other’s thought, not in order to help shape it in order to align it with our own (in some happy consensus model),
but to be willing to enter into the other's provocations without a desire for being sovereign in the encounter, which, of necessity, will always be difficult. But this is also an invitation, I want to believe, following Muñoz's thought, to stand somewhere else together -- somewhere that is neither your time, nor my own, but another time outside of this one altogether (call it the ideal University). This might be a place of joy and pleasure in which we refuse the current relational and disciplinary regimes that insist we pose our desires against each other and instead experience together what it means to leave ourselves behind in favor of a new relationality -- a new touching, a new communication, a new encounter -- that would, in Bersani's idiom, transcend all relations. So take ecstasy with me, and futurize with me. There is another way.

246
Like

12 comments:

Bill Benzon said...

Hmmm…. Though I forget the thinker's name, there is a classic line of thought in the sociology of knowledge dating from the first half of the 20th Century concerning the conditions under which ad hominem arguments become prominent. As I recall, the notion was that such arguments become prevalent when the overall field of discourse has become uncertain. So, people have differences, but it's not at all clear how one articulates and adjudicates those differences, so you attack someone's motives rather than their positions.

I'm wondering if we're not in a similar state now? Were people making calls for generosity and charity even ten years ago? I entered the blogosphere in the middle of 2005 (though I'd been online for a decade by the time), making comments at The Valve. There may have been some talk of charitable readings back then, but there seems to have been an upswing since then.

In fact, I almost wonder if the (academic) blogosphere is partly responsible for creating the conditions under which calls for generosity seem necessary. Discourse can "flow" at a more rapid pace than was possible in the print world and yet it retains that impersonality, which disappears in face-to-face conversation at conferences and seminars.

And then there's this very particular conversation over at Crooked Timber about aggressive argumentation and gender within the discipline of philosophy: Speech-and-Debate vs. The Agon of Authenticity: How Least Badly To Fight, in Philosophy?

5:45 AM

Bill Benzon said...

Come to think of it, I've got a recent post that's relevant. For some time now I've been advocating that literary critics do a lot more descriptive work. So much that the only way to do it is to agree on norms and work cooperatively.

In part I'm thinking about the descriptive work that has been done and continues to be done in biology, all those life forms meticulously described and catalogued. Without those descriptions and that catalogue Darwin would have been sunk. The range of descriptive material he had to have at his disposal far exceeded what he could possibly have done himself. He had to rely on the work of others.

The interesting thing about work is that it began with a simple question that people started asking back in the late 15th and early 16th centuries: All those plants and animals in the ancient texts, are they same as the ones we know here and now? That's an interesting question; how do you answer it? And that question led to others, such as: are the plants and animals we have here in Florence the same as the ones you guys have there in Paris? How can we be sure?

Anyhow, I sent a link out on several lists in which I called for a descriptive program aimed at a particular handful of formal features (ring composition). One scholar asked how such a project could ever get off the ground with the post-structuralists making all sorts of objections about categories and such. I responded that the post-structuralists aren't the problem. The problem is a set of disciplinary norms that focuses on everyone having their own interpretation. Those norms predate any and all post-structuralist forms of criticism. We don't know how to do cooperative work because the discipline hasn't called for it.

7:38 AM

Eileen Joy said...

Thanks for your comments, Bill, and for that link as well to the post at Crooked Timber, which is certainly apropos to my thinking here. I have to say, though, that I'm not as interested in a diagnosis of the problem as I am in simply moving away from it (or, choosing different directions for how we engage with each other's work). I also do not believe for one minute that the blogosphere created this problem, although it certainly (perhaps) exacerbates the problem, given the somewhat less formal nature of the medium [versus, say, a book review published in a traditional academic journal]. Scholars have been mean to each other since there were scholars, to be frank. Double-blind peer review has certainly produced a lot of
In the Middle: This is Not My (or, Our) Time, so Please Take Ec...

http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2013/12/this-is-not-my-o...

nastiness, and there was a lot of bitchiness during that dinner banquet in Plato's Symposium. There is a reason I cited Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents -- because the default human mode, in my mind, is fear of the Other, and also self-preserving selfishness. But we can do better.

Bill Benzon said...

"I also do not believe for one minute that the blogosphere created this problem..."

Agreed.

"...certainly (perhaps) exacerbates the problem..."

I'm willing to go with certainly.

"There is a reason I cited Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents -- because the default human mode, in my mind, is fear of the Other, and also self-preserving selfishness."

There is this idea that I read in Lévi-Strauss (I think), though I have no reason to believe it is novel to him, the homo sapiens sapiens rose to dominance by wiping out rival hominin species. Like the Neanderthal.

As for diagnosis, I don't intend to spend a lot of time trying to refine whatever diagnosis I've already suggested. However, I was an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins when the French landed. I saw the early days of how that went. I listened to J. Hillis Miller, a gentlemen scholar, tell a graduate seminar that the intellectual value of the MLA was doubtful. Fifteen years later he was President of the MLA, and mourning the demise of deconstruction. A few years ago he gave an interview to the minnesota review (2009) that should be required reading for everyone in literary studies, though what you or someone else may get out of it may be different from what I have.

But I've also seen the so-called linguistics wars, albeit from a distance, and those, I've read, were as bad as anything that's happened in the humanities. The resentment still lingers - I saw in the blogosphere not a month ago.

And there's the AI wars.

And then in the 1990s science writer John Horgan publishes *The End of Science*. More science bashing? I read it and, no, not at all. Horgan loves science. He also thinks a lot of it is spinning its wheels. Could he be right?

A lotta wars.

Most of this time I've been watching from outside the academy. I lost a tenure battle in the mid-1980s, and gave up trying to get another academic post. But I haven't given up thinking, writing, and publishing. And what I'm wondering is if we're not caught up in some Major Cultural Upheaval that's going to end up sending a lot of cherished ideas to the retirement home. Are the OOO and SR battles local to this region of the humanities or are they episodes, moments, in large-scale sea change in ideas that is Everywhere?

Melie said...

A few thoughts spring to mind. The first: that humanities graduate students are encouraged to perform this kind of "generous reading" you are advocating over the first few years of our career, then trained to stop doing that, pick a space, and set up camp in it. Some don't ever then come to the realization that at some point, leaving that space is the best option to grow as a thinker/scholar, and in order to do that, you must read generously again to find a new space to inhabit — there's a degree of rigidity that comes with finishing the dissertation, or so it seems to me: this is where you 'belong' now and anything else is superfluous/ not important to your work/ not applicable to what you do/ not "real" scholarship (dependent upon who you have been working with); you 'don't have time' to read outside your area and you should "focus." So, to encourage a more generous approach to reading over the course of a career, the training model for professors needs to be tweaked.

Then, too, as long as the peer review process for journals continues to be a watchdog operation in which the same, 20 or so professors are the go-to folks for reviewing article submissions, we are not likely to see much change in terms of what is published. Read and cite the "right" scholars, and follow the traditional trajectory of thought for the text(s) you are examining, or risk not being published. There is very little (no) generous reading going on among peer reviewers. My rejection comments have included elements such as "interesting argument but I don't buy it so I can't recommend for publication"; "provocative and interesting new thinking, but fails to understand the real purpose of this sort of text" (there's a "real" purpose behind a romance, lai or fabliau?); "interesting thinking and could be a good piece if it was further developed and took into consideration the work of these scholars (who aren't and/or haven't ever examined the same elements of the text that I am interested in)" and so forth. I don't mind being rejected -- and goodness knows I have written some clunky things that deserve rejection! -- but I do mind very much when the stated primary reason for rejection is because the reviewer, personally, doesn't like or agree with my ideas. If you can write, "I must say that it made me consider this thing I've read many times very differently" on a review, then that piece should get a revise and resubmit, at least!

Finally, your post puts me in mind of the initiative of "Invitational Rhetoric" put forth by Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin in a 1995 essay that has very much stuck with me since I read it. Highly recommended for anyone who hasn't come across it but is interested in this notion of a more generous scholarship -- which I am very much in favor of and seek to implement in my own work.
Anonymous said...
Eileen. I picked up a book that has sat on my bookcase for years after reading this.
I was surprised to read this section in the book this morning, started looking at boredom again recently, this must have been where I first came across the subject in print but had forgotten it.

Cite it as you almost seem to touch on it in some of you're responses.

Bill Miller associates such things with societies that have space for leisure time.

"Boredom is an unpleasant emotion that people try to avoid. And in materially impoverished cultures which the classic honor-based cultures tend to be there do not exist the variety of distractions we have come to rely on to alleviate us from its throes. In conditions of general material deprivation, people tend to find in other people and themselves, rather than things, the means to banish boredom, for people are not as rare as things But people as a general matter are not interesting either unless they can be provided with qualities that will make them so......Competition, contention, conviviality generate that capacity.”

William Ian Miller, Humiliation and other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence.

Anonymous said...
p.s I was tempted to post the cite in Karl's 'Small realization about anthropocentrism'

Jeb

10:39 AM

Eileen Joy said...
Mellie: as someone who edits two journals and also many books [and who runs a press], I find your comments both to ring true and also be a bit dismaying, but: have HOPE! You're absolutely right, I think, that graduate school inculcates us with cross-purposes: explore! Then: stop reading! And peer review of scholarship can be just atrocious and the worst kind of small-minded gate-keeping. BUT: there are lots and lots of good examples of unselfish, generous peer review at the same time. I have received both kinds over the course of my career, and while I can't speak for other editors and journals, I can tell you that at postmedieval we insist on cordial, friendly peer review and that we also want to foster a wide diversity of work, whether or not it lines up with our own critical predilections. At punctum, we are even more GONZO, and our motto is something like "if it's weird, smart, and well-written," we'll publish it. If more and more people [including early-career researchers] would start-up more journals, zines, presses, etc. with this sort of openness to the Other, I think we'll be moving in the right direction. When it's "broke," everyone has to help fix it. Everyone needs to be a maker, a producer, etc. Thanks also for that tip to the Foss and Griffin piece, as I did not know about it.

11:53 AM

Eileen Joy said...
Jeb: I love William Ian Miller. As someone trained in Anglo-Saxon studies, I've been reading him for quite some time, but I had forgotten about this quotation: it's wonderful, if discomfiting, of course. Thanks for sharing that.

11:57 AM

Anonymous said...
"if discomfiting"

Perhaps a cause of optimism. Book opens with a description of the writers involvement in the group humiliation a fellow academic.

But really its reflection, increased awareness and empathy with the subject that is playing out when things are grounded in these types of observation.

The way the subjects that underpin the remark have played out are also a cause for optimism.

Rich creative environment we build hold out the hope of changing our minds.

What makes studying culture so vital I think.

That's a wonderful thing.

3:04 PM

Chris Taylor said...
A wonderful read, thank you!
Anonymous said...

Hi Eileen! I came across this post in the course of following the 'Brown v. OOO/Morton' cycle (I recently read Realist Magic and wanted to hear others' thoughts about it), and I think you've hit on a key concept of a project I've had in mind for a while. Not to take up too much space/time in a two year old thread, I see very vividly the social condition about which you complain, and wish to emphasize that it is by no means limited to academia/scholasticism...indeed, what I will here call VIRULENT READING (as opposed to the generous variety) is constantly used by people outside of intellectual institutions to undermine those institutions. This has often been attributed--wrongly, I believe--by academic scholars to 'anti-intellectualism'. In fact, these supposed mental luddites are often quite brilliant and well-educated, but within a scope so narrow as to put the narrowest of academic pedants to shame. In trying to talk about speculative realism with people in these circles (as part of the project I mentioned), I'm constantly faced with charges of being 'stuck in academia'. What's interesting about this is that my accusers actually desperately wish they weren't stuck outside of it, which I can understand: I've been stuck outside it for 17 years and can't wait to get back in, but I don't think the way to get back in is to engage in cocky talk about how I'm better off without it.

As an SR/OOO guy, I don't think 'academia' is actually a container-like thing 'over there' that you can be in or out of; rather I think it's an aesthetic effect produced by the interaction of 1+n objects (rather like 'time', 'space', 'nature', 'the garden', 'the hood', etc.).

Anyway, I think your briefly mentioned concept of 'the ideal University' is a delicious and ecstatic one, and I'd like to talk to you about it.

4:42 PM

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