In the Middle

peace love & the middle ages

Saturday, October 26, 2013

Working Darkly and Beautifully at the Bottom of Our Game: Failing, Fragility, and Making Things

by EILEEN JOY

But if we are to commit ourselves truly to the study of the past, to the study of the humanities, what can we really gain from the Thesian good man speaking well? Is the buttoned-down, impersonal professionalism suited to profit-driven business enterprises a good fit for our wider, stranger enterprise of shared inquiry? Our very strength, our very expertise, comes from darkness, indeterminacy, unmarketably disastrous historical realities, hanging, drowning, plague, ruin. Strange dark Saturnine knowledge, and all the unsightly darkness that goes with it. Let's see with our flawed vision, be happy with less than enough, and work darkly and beautifully at the bottom of our game.

-Brantley L. Bryant, "Saturn's Darkness," Dark Chaucer

As we engage with the Canterbury Tales we bring those fictional texts into our real lives; we live with those signifiers, as Aranye Fradenburg so movingly put it at the last [New Chaucer Society] Congress; and as they live in us the boundary between self and other, subject and object, past and present is permeated. As we remember our colleagues who have died we keep their spirits alive. I would like us to consider, and nurture, all the ways in which we have not left the past behind, the ways in which we have all kinds of time. For I would like to learn to live finally.

~Carolyn Dinshaw, "All Kinds of Time" [NCS 2012 Presidential Address]

A warning: this blog post will be strange and weird and possibly discomfiting, it will be overly personal [I will risk embarrassing myself, and on purpose], it will be incoherently digressive, it will be sad, and yet it will try, nevertheless, to affirm some things. It is not about medieval studies, except tangentially.

I never have time to myself anymore; I don't even know what "time to myself" would look, or feel, like. Somehow, I have a partner who sticks by me, even though to be "by me," or beside me, has increasingly fewer and fewer returns, for I have retreated into a world where I work obsessively and at a fever pitch, with little regard for my own health, my own sanity, or anyone close to me who might need a more generous share of my focused attention. I have let many friendships lapse, I have let many emails and phone calls go unattended, I have let many students down who needed a closer look at their writings, and yet this work, perversely, brings me great joy -- I feel most alive when I am doing this work [for example, editing and formatting books for punctum, editing issues of postmedieval, organizing symposia and seminars and conferences, traveling in order to attend events to which I have been invited to speak or participate in some way, etc.], and when I am in transit and on the move, when I am meeting new people, when I am taking risks to test out new ventures, new ideas, new collaborations, I am most happy. The thought of settling, of staying in one place, of adopting any routine whatsoever, fills me with dread. I worry sometimes that I am a risk junkie -- I've never liked to ski downhill or jump out of planes or race cars [I'm not that kind of risk junkie], but truth be told, I like making dangerous leaps and going where, supposedly, only fools rush in. I like testing out certain waters without a life-jacket, and if someone, or several someones, tell me
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that's not such a good idea. It just encourages me to do it even more. Somewhere, in some manual, there is probably a listing for this kind of behavior as some sort of "disorder," but I find it exhilarating, enlivening. It's like falling in love. Over and over again. Since conventional social life actually discourages us from falling in love too much, or too often, with persons [one of the tragedies of our shared experience], I've given myself permission to fall in love with things and ideas, with projects, with other people's books, with other people's desires to accomplish something, or to self-actualize. Thus, I make myself multiply and move, partially hidden, among other people's desires for more, rather than less, life. I live in the space(s) of what other people want, and for the most part, I am happy there. After all, this is what I want, too. This is not altruism; it is sheer desire, and it provides for me what Proust once called a "celestial nourishment."

What prompts me to share this? Several things. One is the fact that, even though I kind of suspect that many people would describe me as a "successful" person, I nevertheless don't feel successful very often. I'm not saying I never sit back and reflect that I've accomplished some things [I know I have], but indeed, most days I tortured myself with thinking about all of the things I have failed to do. For every book I edit, and for every essay I write, there are several more that I have failed to edit, and failed to write. For every deadline I make, there are several I fall to make. I forget to mail check, I put off filling my taxes, I don't call my parents enough, I can't read all the books I feel I "should" read, I don't pet my dogs enough, I miss doctors' appointments, I neglect the boxwoods and roses in my garden, I rush down streets without raising my eyes to meet the gaze of others, etc. -- and yes, we are all feeling this sense of how we could do more, do better, every day ... this is human, after all, but so-called professional "failings" can feel more acute. So, for every person who thinks I am dependable and trustworthy as an editor or an author, there are at least four times as many who think I am a liar and incapable of "getting the job done." "I don't know how to say "no," I want to say "yes" to everything, and I often do. It gets me in trouble. I can't tell you how many grant applications I have written [and some, I have received] for books that will never be written and archival research that will never be undertaken. I know I'm not the only one who has this problem, although I feel we often hide this fact of our lives from each other because it is often too painful to admit that we cannot "keep up," that we cannot meet all of our obligations, that we are letting our colleagues down, that we are not the intellectual superheroes we would like to imagine we are. So much of what we do, scholarship-wise, is really pro bono work, although yes, we need to publish for tenure and promotion, but it still feels like that thing we do "after" we have first met a whole host of other obligations, especially our teaching and the service work we do for our departments and colleges and universities, if we are lucky enough to have regular faculty appointments, and even if we are adjuncting, or thrust into some sort of post-grad limbo, we are still running mightily, often out of breath, to craft that thing called a c.v. Not to mention our so-called "personal" lives and all of the obligations [pleasant or otherwise] that there besiege our senses and minds and hearts. Let us reflect on this and be kinder to each other when we do not meet our obligations. Not meeting our obligations is part of what we do. It is to be expected. So the next time someone misses a deadline you have imposed, let it go, and sweetly. They do not mean to offend you, or to let you down. They have come up short and will torture themselves enough for that without your assistance.

And what prompts me, then, to also share these thoughts and feelings is Jeffrey's post from the other day, "Why is Blogging Hard Work?" Why, indeed? Because not too long ago [roundabout 2006 and onwards for a few years], blogging felt like the most exhilarating thing we could do as a kind of alter-activity to the more deadening routines of what might be called the traditional protocols of an often overly and austerely micro-managed academic career. But now blogging has become part of the profession, and it, too, can sometimes feel like an obligation, like a chore [but my friends, it is always hard to write, no?], and thus it appears that, more and more, we are relying on more micro-social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr to share our thoughts and experiences with each other, academically and otherwise, and this has no little relation, I would argue, to the hyper-speed up nature of so many aspects of our lives today, where we find increasingly less and less time to reflect, to gather our thoughts, and to share something of what we [hope to] find and count as valuable with each other. And frankly, for the most part, I embrace these social media -- they help me to feel connected, in real and vibrant ways, with people I don't see in person as often as I would like, and the exchanges within those media can lighten a day otherwise weighed down by the obligations that weigh us down -- the endless grading of papers, committee meetings, grant applications, writing -- but also the personal disappointments and hardships: relationships that fall apart, the death of loved ones, the lost jobs, disagreements with friends, difficult children, difficult parents, sickness and ill health, depression, anxiety, housekeeping, the rejected articles, and so on. And yet, in the comments to that same post by Jeffrey, Kate Maxwell wrote, in support of the blog post as a special sort of genre,

Blog posts, which don't move so fast [as Facebook and Twitter], and which don't exclude the half of the world in darkness at the time of publication, are thus far more attractive. In short, if you've got something substantial to say and you want me to read it, blog it. I may not comment on it -- I think this is the first time I've commented on ITM despite being an avid reader for some years -- but I will ponder it for days, years even. Instant gratification has its place, but what would we become if we sought after only that? The ability to respond via web 2.0 is great, but even better because it's not obligatory. Sometimes it's good to be quiet and thoughtful.

Sometimes it's good to be quiet and thoughtful. This blog post is an attempt, in the midst of what has become, for me, a hurricane-tsunami of work and frenetic traveling, to be quiet and thoughtful. Indeed, I am "not" doing several things tonight I should be doing. There is so much all of us "should" be doing at any given moment. But let us be quiet and thoughtful together. This is also a chance for me, perhaps, to indulge in a little sadness, to register the sadness of the world, to pause, to absorb what is dark in the midst of what, for me, is often the brightest and most beautiful. I believe in love, I believe in the power of love, and love for the most part, is measured in the heart. For the most part, I am lucky, happy, but I also suspect that is a form of madness, a kind of self-enclosed and obstinate insistence on always seizing joy as a kind of narcissistic drug, and from whoever and whatever is close-at-hand, with no thought of "consequences." That's why I love...
parties. I could do worse, of course than to be this sort of addict, this sort of fool. And here I show my cards as well to say that, increasingly, for me, the only ethos I can really embrace or muster the energy to care about anymore [after curing myself of an early-career infatuation with Levinas] is the one I find in Foucault’s late writings, when he was focused on “the care of the self,” or what David Halperin, describing Foucault’s thought at that time, has argued is a type of “work” on the self [an ascesis, as Foucault termed it], in order to bring about, “not a given condition but a horizon of possibility, an opportunity for self-transformation, a queer potential.”

And this brings me to the third reason for writing this post [and there is a fourth reason! and a fifth!], and here I risk too much [perhaps], on a personal level, and I will be a bit oblique [purposefully], but as I was in the midst yesterday of a pretty terribly busy morning editing various punctum projects, someone posted a link on their Facebook page to a cluster of essays on an academic journal’s weblog [that shall remain nameless] that featured the woman with whom my previous partner of 17 years had had a protracted, messy, and ultimately tragic affair. I had not thought about this person in several years, and there she was, starting at me on Facebook. Clicking on the link [because, come on, I couldn’t help myself], I found myself at a piece she had written in which she mentioned the affair with my former partner, and how it had somewhat debilitated her [momentarily, and . . . it debilitated a lot of people, of course, including me], and I was reminded of a somewhat uncomfortable fact that I had managed to suppress for about 3 years -- that she had written an entire memoir about it. My previous partner had told me that this person was talking to agents in NYC about this memoir and I filed it away in my brain under “that will never happen, don’t worry about it.” Well, apparently it did, and yesterday I downloaded it to my iPad and read the entire thing from start to finish.

On one level, an exercise in masochism, to be sure. For this was a messy business, and involved all three of us working at the same university and running endgame after endgame around each other. In reality, it got pretty ugly at times and involved Orestea-style drama, various sorts of reckless behavior, bouts of lacerating self-pity, physical self-harming, desperately furtive encounters, the woeful neglect of a teenage child who was also suffering, and I could go on . . . but won’t. There were moments of light as well -- for me, two other colleagues at the university who sort of took me in and tended to me, lovingly and with humor, through this entire ordeal. And several of my colleagues at Southern Illinois who, while I was away at the other university on a sort of unofficial leave, never ceased checking in on me. Luckily, I do not appear at all in the book except as “that other person” [the author’s account of the whole affair is pretty lopsided, but it’s “her” book, so much more to her], but I’m afraid my previous partner figures on many pages, and not in the best of lights [her characterization, although dead-on in places, also feels two-dimensional -- she isn’t really rendered in any sort of fullness and mainly becomes a screen against which the author flails herself -- in the end, the book is only really about “her” and feels occasionally claustrophobic as a result]. I found the experience of reading the book painful, terrifying, and also cathartic. Everything I had always suspected but which had not necessarily been shared with me was confirmed. Everything that was shared with me was confirmed again, and in sometimes unbearable detail. Things I never knew were also revealed. I honestly never felt that this period in my life had any power to affect me ever again, but, I was wrong. It should be stated, and unequivocally, that my previous relationship has been over for about 4 years and that we parted, unbelievably, on warm and good terms, and stay in regular touch. But it must also be shared that, when all of this was happening [2005-06], I felt as if my life were ending, and I couldn’t imagine one good reason why I would still want to even be alive. I want to re-emphasize: I didn’t care anymore if I lived or died. Without my previous partner in my life, I felt as if the world were a vast, inhospitable desert. My life had no possibility, no meaning, no light breaking over the horizon . . . or so I thought.

Now, this memoir I was reading yesterday . . . it won’t win the Pulitzer and you’re likely never heard of it. But parts of it were terrifically well-written, and a strange thing began to take hold of me as I was reading it: I took “her” side, the author’s side, the other woman’s side. Before, I frankly never even really cared about her as a person -- she was more like a cipher to me, someone I could just easily hate, someone who always appeared to me to be intent on fucking with other people’s lives just for the hell of it, who maybe was mentally unstable [there are more details relative to that, but I would rather not share them, I would rather not turn this into some sort of psycho-melodrama, it’s always too easy to say other people are “crazy,” and in any case, that is why she wrote her book, to come clean with her own “stuff,” as it were, and again, more power to her], but here she is in her own book, a total mess, wrecked in the head and heart by the same person who had also wrecked me in my head and heart. But do you know what? There are no villains here. Even before I read this book, I had long ago decided to never harbor any ill will toward my previous partner [you will never find me in the filing cabinet of break-ups in the folder marked “revenge, vindictive”]. One night, after the affair was over and we had broken up, then gotten back together [before breaking up again, for good], she apologized to me, saying she had suffered from temporary insanity, and . . . would I forgive her? [I should point out here that there were other affairs, too, she never admitted to, but that I knew about.] And what I said, and I will never forget it and never regret it is, “no, I will not forgive you because you do not need to be forgiven. You have nothing to apologize for. You have done nothing wrong. You were human. That is all.” How could I begrudge my partner for falling in love [or lust] with others, when my own [secret] world was filled with the same wayward [if unfulfilled] passions? I must remind ourselves. It’s about helping each other to build a world in which horizons are made to feel open and not permanently settled into some sort of stony, obdurrate place. It’s about helping others to feel, anything is possible, my life is ongoing, anything could happen. I, we, have a future, because nothing is decided, for sure. I, we, could love again.

And what I have realized since, too, is that there is no “temporary insanity.” There is only permanent insanity. That is the human condition. We don’t know what we want most of the time, and most of our actions are unconscious [embodied], as any good neuroscientist will tell you. Of course, we should try as
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This brings me to the fourth reason for writing this post -- a not-so-great review of Speculative Medievalisms: Discography, in The Medieval Review on October 14th, which I, uncharacteristically, reacted to this way on Facebook:

DEAR JUSTIN: I'M SO SORRY YOU HAD SUCH A HORRIBLE EXPERIENCE WITH THIS BOOK. PLEASE ACCEPT MY SINCEREST APOLOGIES. I'M ESPECIALLY MORTIFIED BY THAT WHOLE REFERREN/S REFERO INCIDENT. HOW COULD WE ON THE OTHER HAND, IT WAS OUR INTENTION TO MAKE THE VOLUME AND ITS CONTENTS AS USELESS AS POSSIBLE, SO THANK YOU FOR NOTICING. THE ENTIRE BOOK WAS INTENDED AS A MASTUBATORY EXERCISE, IN FACT, IN USELESSNESS. IT FELT GOOD, TOO. REALLY GOOD. YOU'RE RIGHT ABOUT THE INCOHERENCE, TOO. ALSO INTENTIONAL. ALSO, ARE YOU SAYING THAT WHEN "YOU" LOOK IN A MIRROR, YOU ARE "NOT" NON-VIOLENTLY BEHEADED. HUH? THAT'S WEIRD. ANYWAY, APOLOGIES AGAIN. I AM USING ALL CAPS HERE TO INDICATE THAT, MAYBE, I'VE HAD TOO MUCH COFFEE TODAY AND NOT ENOUGH STREUDEL. I'D LIKE TO GIVE YOU THE PORTION OF YOUR LIFE BACK THAT YOU ARE *NOT* NON-VIOLENTLY BEHEADED. HUH? THAT'S WEIRD. ANYWAY, APOLOGIES AGAIN. I AM USING ALL CAPS HERE TO INDICATE THAT, MAYBE, I'VE HAD TOO MUCH COFFEE TODAY AND NOT ENOUGH STREUDEL. I'D LIKE TO GIVE YOU THE PORTION OF YOUR LIFE BACK THAT YOU SPENT READING AND REVIEWING OUR BOOK, BUT I'M NOT THAT POWERFUL, SO INSTEAD I'LL JUST SEND YOU A GIFT CARD FOR STARBUCKS. SINCERELY, THE PUBLISHER -- with Jeffrey J Cohen and 13 others.

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It's always satisfying to receive a good, or "glowing", review of one's work, but I think we should be
complimented by the good review in the same way we are discomfited by a bad review -- both miss the same
point: that every book is a flawed, even a failed, and incomplete, human/nonhuman assemblage. All books
have mistakes. All books "don't" focus on some subjects and texts in favor of other subjects and texts [there
is always something more a book "could" address that it does not address]. All books have holes in their
arguments. All books promise more than they can actually deliver. All books comprise certain
incoherencies, certain errancies of thought and writing, certain lacunae, certain blind spots, certain places
where an author hurried to finish, meaning to return, and never did. Let us begin our reviews by
acknowledging this, and even while delineating some of any book's flaws [because that might assist both
authors and readers with future projects -- *we'll call this productive "fault*], let us also hunt for what is
valuable, nevertheless, however partial it might be. We do this work for each other, and no one else. We
must be friends in this venture. We must be collaborators. Justin Lake, I apologize for my sarcasm on
Facebook, even if you never saw it or heard about it. I did not treat you like a person, but more as an
object of my scorn. But I am asking you to also treat the authors of the books you review as persons. Books
are not collocations of ideas detached from persons. We scholars, after we teach, after we cook and wash
laundry, and put children to bed, and walk our dogs and grade our papers, and take our pills, and turn out
the lights, and sleep fitfully at night, and in the solitude of our studies, apart from those we love ... we
write, and for whom do we write? For whom? We need to get deeper into the physical and psychic muck of
the being(s) that compose together what we call 'scholarship.' This, too, is embodied, and partly
unconscious thought. This, too, comprises wayward desires we can't always share (fully) with (all) others.
To review such work, with generosity, is to practice a difficult sort of love, one where you don't always get
what you want, but where you give others the space to desire their own objects. Reviewing, I want to say,
as something like Dominic Pettman's *phanto-cartography*.

This brings me to the fifth reason for writing what is now [characteristic for me, I know] a very long post. Or
is it a letter? As some of you know [but some of you likely don't], I left my regular faculty appointment this
past year in order to concentrate all of my energies on the BABEL Working Group and punctum books, and I
do have days where I wonder if I haven't entirely lost my mind in doing so. But even before I left academia
"proper," as it were [although, truth be told, I am working more now on behalf of academia than I ever did;
I haven't really gone "any"-where], I was always tortured by the thought that I spent too much time on other
people's work and writing, and on organizing various events, and not enough time on my own scholarship.
Where is my monograph, for example, all of the ones I proposed via grant applications (three, I believe,
maybe four) and the like, for oh so many years? FAIL. I cannot tell you how many amazing journal issues and
essay volumes I have been invited to contribute to, and to which I said "yes," and then ... FAIL. On more
than one occasion, and in several different places in the past year, more than one prominent scholar in the
field of medieval studies has taken me aside and said, in essence, "all this stuff you are doing with BABEL
and punctum is great, but what about your own work? You really *should* be concentrating more of your
energies on your own work, on your own writing.*

My ... own ... work. I love to write and I will not lie: I have days where I literally mourn the days I do *not*
have time to write. I have so many ideas, for articles, for stories, for poems, for books. There are so many
orphan children standing around my desk when I work, and there are times when I deeply regret, and even
worry, that I have not spent more time working on what might be called "my own work" [which is to say: my
own scholarship, however we might define that]. But you see, I love to make things, I always have. In the
winter of 1996, I dropped out of graduate school to take a job as an apprentice to a master garden
designer, and for 3 years I worked under her tutelage in eastern Tennessee. We traveled together
throughout the southeast, hunting for rare plants and trees and field stone, and I spent almost every day
hunched over in the dirt, digging holes, pruning vines and roses, watering plants, building walls. We
designed gardens and then we watched them grow. We returned every week to re-sculpt our handiwork, to
fertilize and weed, to keep these lowly Edens manageable, to turn them into paintings by Watteau and
Monet. It wasn't Nature; more like a process of composing *with* Nature. But is was composing. It was
making. And I cannot put into words the satisfaction I felt -- what it felt like to plant a 1-gallon rose and
watch as, over the years, it climbed a wall, or joined forces with a crepe myrtle.

And I realize that everything I do -- but also everything *we* do -- is a form of composing, of making. I love
publishing because I love seeing the raw material of other persons' ideas and writings turned into books and
I like the way it feels to hold those books in my hand and say, "we made this together" [and that includes all
of the volunteers who help me with punctum, as well as the authors]. I like organizing events [with a lot of
assistance, I might add, from many hands] and seeing the serendipitous collisions that occur between
persons who otherwise might not have run into each other. That is a form of composing, too, with persons
as the "materials." It may not be the kind of work that the academy typically "rewards" [in the same way it
rewards the singular scholar who produces a vast and original "body" of scholarship], but the actions
whereby one adds things to the world, or joins things together -- and beautiful things, at that -- is deeply
rewarding, in and of itself. Writing is also, obviously, a form of composing, and thus of making. And so it
turns out we are all making things together, and we need not privilege one form of making over another.
This, too, is about desire. So acknowledge your desires, and the fact that they are in your work, and let
others have their own desires, while always also acknowledging that none of us really knows half the time
what we are trying to do. But we are trying. Living, and working, is a fragile business. And we must "take
care" of that. And we should also want, as Carolyn Dinshaw expressed in her NCS Presidential Address last
year, *to learn to live finally,* and the university is not just the place where we *work.* As I wrote in my
Prelude to Aranyne Fradenburg's new book, *Staying Alive,* the university is one important form of social life--it is not just a place where we study, think, and develop knowledge apart from our "real lives." The university is a form of life, a habitus, and we live (and desire and agonize) there with others.
So let us take care of that. And let us also bid goodbye to thinking we can control how anyone else desires anything, or should desire. We are finite and indeterminate. As are our studies.

9 comments:

Stephanie Trigg said...

This blog post is about as good a reason for reading blogs as you could ever hope to read.

2:07 AM

Jeffrey Cohen said...

I really love this post Eileen: in its vulnerability, in its capacious embrace, in its making of something beautiful. Your ability to be at once open to experiment, honest, synthetic, and inspirational is just amazing. I'm honored to be your friend and I will say here something I've said to you again and again: the world I know and my own small life within that world are both so much better for knowing you.

But (and I hate to write anything that follows a "but" in a comment -- I know the genre of blog comments intimately, and it feels like concern trolling even though I am hoping dearly it is not) I'm also uncomfortable with one section: the clipping of the Facebook post about the review of Speculative Medievalisms into the body of the blog post, especially keeping Kate Maxwell's words in mind. It seems to me one thing to disseminate a parodic note via an ephemeral mode of communication, and another to archive it (and make it more public and more permanent) within a blog post that will be on the web indefinitely. On the other, you will notice that I didn't comment on the original FB post. It felt like ganging up. I want there to be safe spaces to vent, of course; but because the setting of that FB was also public, I am uncomfortable with how it comes across when a large group of people poke fun at a professor without tenure who should perhaps himself be allowed to make mistakes, experiment, and so on. And I also wonder about transposing comments and likes rendered in one forum into another, since maybe -- maybe, I don't know the answer to this -- some of those who interacted didn't necessarily want their likes and notes frontpaged.

That sounds really preachy. I fear I am coming across like one of those people sending you private notes that say "Do more of your own work" and otherwise police what you should be doing in ways that are not actually all that helpful or supportive. I also am very often wrong, and admit to fucking up frequently. But there is something about a person being in a potentially precarious position (like an assistant professor in a time of few jobs) that raises all kinds of protectiveness in me, even for people I don't at all know.

Well, I hope you won't take that the wrong way, and I fear it is a huge distraction from what you've actually achieved in the post -- which I want to emphasize again is gorgeous, so full of an aesthetic radiance and an ethical generosity that makes the FB portion as a full quotation seem anomalous. And please: argue with me. That's what a blog is for.

8:10 AM

Eileen Joy said...

Well, Jeffrey, I don't want to argue, per se, but I placed the FB exchange there because:

1) FB exchanges between FB 'friends' are never as private as people imagine they are [I have over 1,000 "friends" on FB and word *always* gets back to people, and I've seen that happen a gazillion times], and therefore I don't believe what I posted on FB was "ephemeral": I think it had actually had negative effects beyond what most people would be willing to tell me, although some did, as I said, by private email, and I was grateful for that],

and

2) I want to APOLOGIZE, and more publicly, to Justin Lake. I wanted to say, I'M SORRY I did that. I wanted to have a forum -- this blog -- in which I could talk a little bit about why I did that, why it made me feel bad, but also, why I still don't like Lake's review. Reviews are public and often don't invite dialogue, and most people "never" respond to reviews, positive or more negative, because it is considered 'bad form,' and every now and then, when an author posts a rebuttal, for example, on The Medieval Review, I think a lot of us privately think, "gee, that person is really wound up, and what difference does it make?" In some ways, the book review is both a really helpful genre [because, in its best aspects it helps us decide what might be useful to read] and also a really bad genre, in terms of opening up conversations about our scholarship. It often feels like a "last word," and never like a conversation.

We have clipped segments of FB posts on this blog before, and perhaps the problem here is that I may have offended some people who would not want their words in that one exchange front-paged again here on this blog: I get that, and I knew it was risky. But Justin Lake also chose to write the review the way that he did, and "as" an untenured assistant professor, so ... okay ... what? He takes a risk, too, and I
would suggest an admirable one. In other words, he can also look out for himself and I seriously doubt our FB exchange will harm him in any way, since we're simply responding, even with sarcasm, to words he wrote and committed to print. Of COURSE I care about those who are untenured, and I spent most of my career trying to help just those persons, as well as those who "never" find a regular footing in the Academy (and so, of "course" the FB thread felt/looking like "gangying up" and again, hence this post). But everyone has to be responsible on some level for the words they commit to print. And then "it", just like Justin, also have to be responsible, and hence my apology. Part of what I'm trying to say with this post is, let's try to be more generous with each other's "divergent" desires for things we actually "don't" all have in common.

9:15 AM

Eileen Joy said...

Which is also to say, just to add here, that I was also trying to say to Justin: it's okay you didn't like the book, and it's okay that maybe I don't like you not liking the book, but maybe we can both step back and say, we want different things, and that's okay, too. Maybe we could be more open and generous about that difference, and make of it, not a dividing line, but a place to meet, to pass by each other as a way of also "making room" for each other.

9:47 AM

Jonathan Hsy said...

YES YES. This generosity of reading and "making room" for divergent modes and perspectives is key (and I say this in reference both to Justin's review and to the response to it).

@Eileen: I did want to say, on the more personal level, I appreciate your openness and honesty (with yourself as well as others). It is not easy to 'break things open' in this way and i am heartened that spaces like this help make that happen.

12:15 PM

Julie Orlemanski said...

Beautiful post, Eileen. 'The desire to want to be new again' moved me especially. On the subject of the collaged-in fb post -- it felt like the most uncomfortable, or dangerous, part of the piece because it does cross lines of intimacy-norms and genre-expectations and tacit social rules -- but for that reason performs exactly what you end up calling for: the jumbling together of seemingly separate spheres of reviews and academic books and blogs and social media by way of experiments in personal intimacy. Maybe you wish you hadn't posted the original fb thingy ("i did kind of regret it"), but since you did post it, your second, considered response (this post) was to delve into what that impulse was about, to render it thinkable and discussable and debatable, expanding what is "public" in the way that blogs always have often been doing...

Also, I thought I'd post my comment from the FB feed here: "Topics for thinking through that the review raised for me: (1) How can we talk (better?) about the relationship between speculative/imaginative writing and a 2,500 year-old tradition of rationalist scholarly enquiry? It seems silly to conclude, as Lake does that, the volume is an invitation to ABANDON rationalist enquiry. I wish he had mused more about the multiplicity of modes of engaging with the past, which don't imply being confused about by their respective knowledge claims (thinking about Adorno on "the essay as form"; also about a spectrum[?] of engagement running from "literary tradition" [bricoleur can haz the past to make new artz] to hard-core Lachmannian stemmas, etc.) (2) Re: the "preaching to the choir" point: BABEL has been really good at incubating "choirs", or relatively intimate intellectual communities to think through certain clusters of ideas. The intimacy and speed and momentum of these conversations make possible different kinds of thinking. So, the question of how the work produced by these "choirs" enters the broader scholarly conversation is a real one, but not usefully explored by dismissing it as merely coterie. Would have been useful for Lake to reflect on the rhetorical possibilities and tendencies of the kind of open-access, on-demand publishing than is done instead of printing a few hundred hardbacks for major research libraries. It would have been nice to see Lake offer his own thoughts on the growing diversity of publishing venues and the effects (positive and negative) that these have on conversations. Definitely not a nice review, but I tend to value the public airing of disagreements about what counts as knowledge, rather than their subsisting as background snark; it creates the conditions for acknowledging real differences, so we can better understand what's at stake in them."

12:53 PM

Michael Sarabia said...

Your post came at a good time for me, Eileen, and was cause for reflection on my own failures. I've the tendency lately to look back at the piles of graduate (and even some undergraduate!) papers and regard them all as failed attempts to write article-quality material (silly, I know.) Considered thus, my failure column is quite substantial.

There used to be a time when I considered all of that work the preparation that it is. I'd like to regard it as a process of stoking the fires, to see all of that work as moving toward inevitable success. But maybe that is wrongheaded, too. Maybe part of slowing down to be thoughtful, as you suggest, requires that I not only acknowledge my failures, but maybe even embrace them. Otherwise, what kind of narcissist will I become if I always expect greatness? Once I labeled that work as nothing but failure, it was out of narcissism, I think, that I suppressed it from my consciousness. As though I wouldn't admit to myself that I'd written (lots of) subpar academic prose. I'd purposely forgotten all the knowledge—even if not polished and pristine—that I'd generated over what is already a lifetime of education. How stupid? How wasteful. How counterproductive, especially considering that I've recently found myself going over the
same ground covered in some of these old papers. Though I’ve outgrown much of the thought they contain, many have moments of rhetorical flourish that remind me why I kept convincing myself to work on this PhD. To risk sounding hokey, that feeling is get from a moment of what seems like perspicacious interpretation is something akin to hope; a hope for exciting and endless possibilities—a horizon of possibilities emerges once I believe I’ve connected with a writer long gone, when I feel as though I’ve done the generous close reading, done the text and an author’s thoughts/feelings some kind of justice. I want for everyone to have that feeling, to nurture it as much as possible, and THAT, initially, was the example I wanted to set for my own family. That I show my children, for instance, how to be open and generous readers (of texts and people) in that way justified my choice to leave behind (maybe just put on hold?) a professional career in another discipline.

Before reading and thinking about your post, I’d forgotten about that justification, and so lately have been feeling like I’ve failed my family (no doubt owing to the brainwashing by patriarchy that must still have some part of me convinced that the only good father is one who has rationally self-maximized in terms of wealth) by selfishly pursuing such an extended education. Your post, in other words, helped remind me to be a more generous reader of my own failures and decisions—to acknowledge and be responsible for them, but find the merits within.

p.s. I think this louie ck clip is appropriate, even if I don’t wholly agree with his assessment on phones and social media (he only focuses on their negative aspects). He talks about how being human is to, as you astutely put it, “register the sadness of the world.” He remarks that doing so builds empathy, and a pathological avoidance of sadness/failure/tragedy can make one mercilessly critical of others.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hByScitf1c

best,

michael

5:14 PM

Eileen Joy said...

Julie: thanks for re-posting your comment from the FB exchange, because it opens up space for considering the motives behind each person’s scholarship: such a mixed bag! Maybe one scholar actually “wants” to extend and elaborate upon 2,500+ years of rationalist inquiry [and thereby also contribute to it, participate in its lineage, etc.], while another scholar wants to take a sledgehammer to it. One scholar wants to appear sensible, another insensible. Unfortunately, not all books wear all of their motives on their sleeves, and many reviewers read from their desires, hoping to get what they want from a book before they’ve really delved deeply enough to ask, “what does this book want from me?” [“or from itself, or others, maybe, regardless of me?”]. It may be too much, at times, to ask a reviewer to be able to even begin to dig into such questions. And there can still be, and should be, disagreement, of course, but perhaps couched within a more capacious critical framework that would somehow do honor to what any book is “trying” to do. It’s funny, but in all of my own reading of speculative realist texts, I have never found a framework that I could neatly ‘apply’ it to a text, for example – it’s much more complicated than that [this is post-continental philosophy, after all]. On the other hand, much of object-oriented thought, more narrowly [such as one finds in Graham Harman and Timothy Morton] does offer such blueprints [but in a way that I find sometimes disheartening: I don’t actually want Tim Morton telling me how to read a poem and in only one way, as he kind of does in his essay in NLH 43, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry”].

I have to also admit that I am trying to do certain things at punctum that purposefully fly in the face of conventional academic publishing and even at times point the middle finger at such. So, can I be surprised when someone doesn’t like that, or finds work that is supposedly messy and incoherent? No. But what still angers me about that review is that, although the book as a whole might not “cohere,” it is a “proceedings” volume, not an anthology designed in advance to cohere in a certain way [although, I now reflect I could have made that more clear in my Introduction – one has to meet a reader’s expectations somewhere in the middle, no?], and it contains essays by really accomplished scholars, such as Jeffrey, Kathy Bidlick, Kellie Robertson, Allan Mitchell, Anna Klosowska [who made two of the highlighted mistakes, one of which, about Plato’s ‘Republic,’ the reviewer took out of context since Anna cited that as a former ‘bad’ reading of ‘The Republic’ in early modernity!], Julian Yates, Drew Daniel, Graham Harman, Eugene Thacker, etc. that in “no” way, on their own, could be considered “bad.” There is more than one way to read any book, of course, and also to write one, and your comments beautifully capture that. I would just simply say, again, that we need more generous reading practices where we attempt to meet authors, somehow, on their own ground. And also to think of fault/failing as potentially productive.

10:52 AM

Eileen Joy said...

Dear Michael: thank you for sharing your own story here, which I found really moving. Before I decided to go to grad. school I worked for almost 10 years [while also somehow getting an MFA] in the business sector: tax accounting, expense accounting, payroll accounting, and other business-management-type jobs. My sister, who works as a senior program officer at NIH [and who is also a geneticist who works on infectious diseases], called me up a few years ago and said, “you know what our parents forgot to tell us? They forgot to tell us we should make money!” We both laughed, because we had both chosen careers in a former “bad” reading of “The Republic” in early modernity!]. We both knew that this was pre-continental philosophy, after all. On the other hand, much of object-oriented thought, more narrowly [such as one finds in Graham Harman and Timothy Morton] does offer such blueprints [but in a way that I find sometimes disheartening: I don’t actually want Tim Morton telling me how to read a poem and in only one way, as he kind of does in his essay in NLH 43, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry”].

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I love Louis C.K., by the way, and watch his TV show regularly. He always makes me wince at what we might call the less attractive aspects of the frail human condition, but in a good way.
In the Middle: Working Darkly and Beautifully at the Bottom o... http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2013/10/darkly-and-beaut...