



The Literary Sphere:
Taking Criticism Online

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PRELUDE

One of the most decried, but also most common, kind of post in the early days of blogging (early to mid-2000s) was the exercise in what came to be called “metablogging”—a blog post about the role and nature of blogging. Considered by many (often including the author) as a blatant act of navel-gazing, many bloggers nevertheless seemed to feel the need for some reflection on this relatively new discursive form, a sort of interrogation of its possibilities but also its limitations. In looking back at all of my own posts at *The Reading Experience* (launched in early 2004), it became clear enough that I did my share of metablogging, but in rereading these posts it also seemed to me that many of them still had resonance in what is now a completely transformed cyber environment. (Few people still speak of the “blogosphere.”)

Inevitably, many such posts involved predictions about the form’s future, and while some of my predictions quite clearly did not come to pass, others have mostly proven accurate—it is now seldom disputed that a blog post can be the vehicle for serious and extended analysis, for example. At the same time, some of my early speculation that the literary blogosphere might come to replace existing “mainstream” newspaper and magazine book coverage seems somewhat extravagant in hindsight, although it is also true that numerous online journals and book review sites eventually appeared that were themselves more or less the beneficiaries of those efforts by bloggers to make online literary discourse respectable. Still, in some of these posts the hostility expressed toward the establishment print media is excessive, even if many of the critics of the emerging blogosphere also at times expressed astonishing hostility toward blogging and bloggers.

In this volume I have included most of my substantial posts on the blog as medium, as well as literary culture online in general. (Cuts have been made in some posts, and more felicitous language occasionally inserted in others.) They are presented in chronological order, from 2004 to 2019. I have chosen this arrangement because it shows the development of my thinking about online literary criticism and because it may perhaps be interesting for readers to survey the issues that arose as literary blogging itself developed. An omission in my own consideration of these issues would have to be the lack of attention given to the rise of social media, especially Facebook and Twitter. The latter in particular signaled the end of the first, expansive era of blogging, providing as it did a more efficient alternative to the blog as a source

of concise commentary and hyperlinks. This has inevitably left the blogger with a smaller audience, but also paradoxically strengthened the case for blogs as a mode of more sustained thinking.

What Can Be Done in a Blog Post?

At a time when blogging appears to be gaining acceptance as a form of critical discourse, Adam Kotsko wonders “what exactly can be done in a blog post” (*The Weblog*). In some ways, seriously-intended blogs and blog posts can be an alternative to conventional print publications, both academic and general-interest, while in others they are best seen as a complement to print, but it doesn't seem likely, or even desirable, that they simply imitate the conventions of journalism or academic scholarship. Therefore, those of us who do see a place for blogging in intellectual/literary discussion ought to be making the attempt to clarify, for ourselves and our readers, the distinctive nature of its contribution, what indeed "can be done" using this medium to engage in substantive debate or commentary about literature, philosophy, or any of the other traditionally "academic" subjects.

Surely it can't be that, as Kotsko puts it, blog posting is "best suited to matters that can be treated conversationally," if by "conversational" Adam means "casual" or "superficial." Certainly blog posts can be casual or superficial, but I see nothing in the nature of the form that requires they be so. In his own response to Kotsko's post, John Holbo makes a point that I want to echo: "Blog posts are short, but obviously no one thinks there are no arguments worth making at less than a thousand words" (*The Valve*). Good arguments and, in the case of literary criticism, compelling readings can indeed be made in a "short" blog post; some arguments and analyses would greatly benefit, in fact, if they were confined to 1500 words or so and shed themselves of the formulaic padding "long" forms sometimes superfluously require. Moreover, I can't see why longer essay-posts treating a topic in a more expansively developed way are inherently impossible: I've read many such posts, and one would think that readers interested in the topic at hand would be willing to read a well-thought out treatment of it whatever the medium in which it's printed. (Screen fatigue seems to me a pretty inadequate excuse for avoiding a perfectly good piece of writing simply because it's online.)

Kotsko's claim is similar to a remark made recently by Joshua Marshall at *Talking Points Memo*. In a post otherwise defending blogging against criticism by certain print snobs, Marshall suggests that "blogging is an ephemeral form of writing. It's written quickly, usually forgotten quickly. It doesn't lend itself to that sort of rigorous writing and rewriting which is often the way

you discover your ideas in your own mind." But even if some bloggers in practice regard their posts as something to be "written quickly," or even if the blogosphere in general is perceived to be crammed with such posts, that doesn't mean blog writing must be practiced in this way. Is there really anything inherent in the way words appear in cyberspace as opposed to the way they appear on a piece of paper that prevents it from being a medium for "that sort of rigorous writing and rewriting which is often the way you discover your ideas in your own mind"? Isn't "rigor" of this kind a product of the kind of effort being put forth by the writer rather than a function of the form

In a recent essay at *Bad Subjects*, Jodi Dean makes a point about the deliberative potential of blogs that one would think Adam Kotsko might appreciate:

. . .The fast pace of networked communication is a prominent meme. Opinions, image, and information are said to circulate rapidly through the blogosphere, like some kind of digital ebola or influenza. For most, this rapidity is a problem, or an excuse. It explains a lack of reflection, the need to respond immediately.

But theory blogs aren't like this. A discussion on theory blogs might spread over half a dozen or more blogs over the course of weeks, like some kind of long running seminar. So, I post something about solidarity on *I Cite*, picking up or reiterating themes already in play on the *Weblog* and *Posthegemony*. The blog *Before the Law* posts a critical rejoinder, countered from different directions in multiple posts by various authors at *Long Sunday* and again at the *Weblog*. Sometimes, someone will accumulate the links and post a general guide to the conversation (the blogger from *Theoria* does this from time to time). Rather than a fast paced media sphere, this exchange is like a slow seminar, focusing on one narrow question that arises on its own, and is addressed over a longer period of time, giving those who engage it opportunity to read and reflect.

In other words, at his own blog and in his contributions to others, Kotsko has himself exemplified a kind of blog discourse and a kind of blog protocol that, while not substituting for those of academe, certainly have every claim to being taken seriously and not just dismissed as "talk," an offhand way of passing one's free time. Further, it's not just "theory blogs" that foster the kind of discussion Jodi Dean describes. Plenty of literary weblogs are focused on longer posts that are frequently part of cross-blog debates that at their best have a seminar-like feel

without being pompous. A similar desire to go beyond current book news and engage in more substantive commentary about current fiction underlies the *Litblog Co-op's* week-long discussions of selected small-press books and less-recognized writers. A number of film blogs have been participating in "blogathons" on specified topics, which generally result in lively and informative mini-essays. Whatever this kind of blog discourse may lack in conventional "rigor" is certainly balanced out by its immediacy and its enthusiasm.

But Kotsko seems most of all to be disillusioned by the comment threads that develop on some blogs, threads that devolve into "blogfights" and debates that "go nowhere." This has become a fairly common complaint. The blogosphere provides "scant room for debate and infinite opportunities for fruitless point-scoring: the heady combination of perceived anonymity, gestated responses, random heckling and a notional 'live audience' quickly conspire to create a 'perfect storm' of perpetual bickering." According to Alan Jacobs, "On many blogs the comments to a given post are 'closed' after a few days—no one is allowed to make further comments—usually because that helps to prevent the accumulation of comment spam, but also because so many threads degenerate into name-calling that the blog administrator has to shoo the belligerents along to another venue. And in any case both the blogger and the commenters have moved along to other posts, other ideas, other conversations" (*Books & Culture*). In general, it would seem, the comment space on weblogs has come to be seen as a place for partisan piling-on, where the converted speak to the converted, or else a kind of intellectual no-man's land, which the innocent traveller looking for disinterested debate enters at his/her peril.

I have never really understood what seems to me an obsession with comments among some bloggers. On the one hand, attracting comments is seen as a measure of a particular post's success, even of a blog's success on the whole. On the other, there is much lamentation when the comment count does indeed begin to climb but the tenor of the thread descends into vituperation and insult. I like receiving thoughtful comments on my own posts as much as anybody, but I don't consider a post a failure (whatever that might mean) if no comments are registered. Indeed, most of us are by now undoubtedly aware of this fairly consistent phenomenon: A short, trenchant if not particularly thought-out post receives numerous, equally trenchant comments, while a longer, more carefully developed post draws distressingly few. But this is really a problem only if you think "blogging" should be confined to the first kind of post and the second

is something else—something that should have instead sought out those "other spaces for other things" that Kotsko refers to at the end of his post. Although presumably these are the very sort of blog posts that produce the "blogfights" of which Kotsko disapproves. Why then rule out of court the very possibility that blogs might aspire to something more substantive, even if virtual fisticuffs don't ensue?

Ultimately, what "can be done in a blog post" is whatever it and its author want it to do. For now, most readers of blogs still prefer that a post remain reasonably brief and not otherwise the kind of discourse more profitably read in print. But to me this is mainly a matter of expediency: The portability of print is still an advantage, and that mode of reading that occurs in the proverbial easy chair or the library nook does still have its pleasures. And these preferences may change, may already be changing. If readers do become fatigued with the "ephemeral," rapid-fire style of blogging, is the alternative simply to pronounce blogs deceased because only that style counts as blogging to begin with, or is it to explore the possibilities of a quieter, less anxious style? Perhaps not picking a blogfight is the best way to avoid it. Perhaps the real alternative to the cumbersome processes of academic publishing, which place too little value on novelty and spontaneity, and to the distance from readers imposed by print publication is not the kind of call-and-response weblog post that leads to the impulsive quarrels to which Adam Kotsko rightly objects but a style of webwriting that seeks to illuminate rather than provoke, that isn't defined by the number of comments it invites but remains open to critical dialogue nevertheless. (Because it does occur online, it would inevitably be subject to the commentary-through-linkage that is actually superior to the print conventions of citation and critique, precisely because of its own expediency.) If this is "conversation," so be it, but ultimately all forms of inquiry have to be conversational in this way, or they're not very scholarly in the first place.

Overturing the Critical Establishment

According to an article in *indieWire*:

. . .technology's greatest gift to film culture may be the blogosphere, which has seemingly ignited a passionate audience for auteur cinema around the country. Film historian David

Bordwell, whose film textbooks are used in college classrooms around the world, has recently taken to blogging, which he calls an "overturning of the critical establishment," he says. "In the 1950s and 1960s, when film culture really got going, it was a small space, mostly in New York City. Now that monopoly is eroding very fast and there is a tremendous amount of people out there. They don't buy newspapers. They're not my students, and they're not the general public, either," he continues. "And their cinephilia is much greater."

I don't know that American literary culture was ever literally a "small space," but it is surely the case that it has long been centered in New York City, whose writers, critics, and publishers have constituted whatever "critical establishment" exists in this country. (Some people might regard the academy as the intellectual arm of our critical establishment, but academic criticism has all but lost interest in monitoring current writers and their work except insofar as these writers can be made to align with the critic's own external political objectives.) It has exerted a "monopoly" on what ultimately can be regarded as acceptable practice, both of fiction-writing and of literary criticism, in the same way New York film culture monopolized the critical discourse about film. All other practices are marginalized, even if in the long run they turn out to be more influential or more durable than those sanctioned by the establishment. (One thinks of Gilbert Sorrentino, a native New Yorker whose work—in criticism as well as in poetry and fiction—was essentially invisible to this establishment, and who could barely get an infuriatingly perfunctory obituary from the *New York Times* on his death.)

(And I don't mean this to be a slam against New York City per se. A critical establishment has to be located somewhere, and in our case New York is it.)

To this extent, I wonder if the blogosphere (the cybersphere more generally) is having/will have the same kind of effect on literary culture Bordwell believes it is having on film culture. It would seem that the litblogosphere has indeed demonstrated there are large numbers of people "out there" who take a passionate interest in books and writing, people who have not much been taken into account by the "mainstream" outlets of opinion (they're not just members of the "general public") but who clearly know literature just as extensively as those reviewers and critics sanctioned by the establishment and have intelligent things to say about it

The establishment response to litblogs has lately been pretty uniformly and intensely negative. Bloggers are accused of being "pooters" who should leave the real thinking to those reviewers who get paid to do it. They sell themselves out "for a couple of review copies and a link on a blogroll." Even when blogs are ostensibly being praised, establishment types prescribe that they "are supposed to be fun and freewheeling, filled with quick snippets written in a breezy, conversational voice," as if this will safely distinguish them from the more serious work being done in the newspapers (!). Perhaps this is all justifiable criticism, but perhaps it is also the collective voice of panic being expressed by those whose authority "is eroding very fast."

Changing What Constitutes Critical Thought

Ron Silliman thinks that

there's going to be – already is, I suspect – some clashing over whether it's possible to do serious critical writing in this form [i.e., blogging]. One of the most interesting things about last December's MLA convention in Philadelphia was listening to one fifteen-minute paper after another & realizing that two-thirds had less in the way of ideas than the average blog note. And this was, by all standards, an excellent MLA convention. Try writing 200 MLA presentations in one year, tho, and your whole idea of what constitutes a critical piece of thinking is going to change. In this sense, the real promise of blogging is the one that it holds for changing what constitutes critical thought, literally marginalizing the academy as a site for such about poetry, returning critical writing instead to the poets themselves, most of whom do not teach, or do so only under the most abject of adjunct circumstances. Perhaps marginalizing is too strong a term – there are, after all, good people in the academy who do serious work – but at least "de-authorizing," de-legitimizing academic critical writing as such, forcing it to compete on an equal basis with the "deep gossip" of poets writing about their own work & that of others. Nothing could be healthier than that. (*Silliman's Blog*)

I mostly agree with this, but I think Silliman both exaggerates the extent to which the academy any longer engages in "critical thought" about poetry (especially current poetry) and fails to reserve a place in the critical consideration of poetry for critics other than poet-critics.

University literature departments have long ceased to be (if they ever were, except in the creative writing programs and the literary magazines many such programs sponsored) the centers of serious literary criticism (criticism of literature, not criticism that happens to include literature as a target of theoretical or cultural analysis), especially criticism of poetry. The "deep gossip" of poets on blogs and in other non-academic publications already in my opinion vastly exceeds in its utility the pseudo-commentary emanating from academe, although I like to think that in its seriousness of purpose, most of this blogcrit goes well beyond "gossip."

Insofar as blogging about poetry (and fiction as well—academic criticism about current fiction is hardly any more useful than its poetry counterpart) does succeed in "marginalizing the academy" even further, this can only be a good thing, so long as academic criticism continues to view literature simply as a "specimen" to be examined for all but its literary qualities. But I also think there is room in poetry blogging for critics who are not also (or perhaps not primarily) poets themselves. Such critics would have "deep" sympathy for the practices and assumptions of working poets but would also provide a critical perspective (ideally buttressed by a similarly deep familiarity with literary history) that didn't reflexively privilege one or another such practice or assumption and that approached both poetry and fiction from the standpoint of the engaged reader rather than the writer and his/her perhaps partisan inclinations. (Which isn't to say the non-poet blogcritic would have no such inclinations, but they would be anchored at a different angle of approach.)

At a time when literary blogs do indeed show an increasing ability to "deauthorize" academic criticism as it has established itself over the past fifty years, it would be a shame if the cleavage in contemporary literary criticism—between academic critics on the one hand and practicing poets and novelists on the other—were to be permanently hardened with little space in between for critics who want to write about literature but who don't ultimately consider themselves either "scholars" or poets. Both poetry and criticism would suffer from such a stark opposition.

Defecating on Dante

In his response to the spat between litbloggers and *n + 1* over "The Blog Reflex," Scott Esposito observed that, however simplistic the *n + 1* analysis really was, literary blogs nevertheless "could use a little honest, intelligent criticism."

I agree. I even agree that some of what "The Blog Reflex" had to say is worth considering, even if it is also true that it isn't clear really "how much *n + 1* reads blogs," as Esposito further points out. There are indeed more weblogs in the litblogosphere that take advantage of the medium "to post the best they could think or say" than are dreamt of in Keith Gessen and Marco Roth's philosophies, whether or not these blogs feature "5,000 word critiques" (although there are some of those, as well). I would hope that most readers of this blog would agree that it mostly attempts to do that, although I do also provide links and shout-outs, which seem to me perfectly appropriate, and even worthwhile, activities, especially if you believe, that literary blogs can be useful in fostering an ongoing discussion about literary matters, a discussion that could be enhanced simply by pointing readers to other participants or to information relevant to it. Thus while some acts of linking and pasting do undoubtedly contribute to the culture of high-speed trivia, others could just as readily advance serious discourse about literature as citations and bibliographies in more recognizably "scholarly" forms of writing.

I also agree that sometimes those bloggers who by and large don't offer longer posts and reviews but instead comment on literary news and issues in a more epigrammatic style actually condense their views too severely—if not to the "I shit on Dante" extreme of unsupported opinionizing, then at least too casually to merit much consideration by serious people. However, Gessen and Roth are wrong to imply that all blogs using this compact method of posting are equally frivolous or worthy of scorn. Mark Sarvas's *The Elegant Variation* seems to particularly rile up Gessen and Roth, but if they bothered to read that blog over the long haul, rather than focusing on individual posts that don't satisfy their expectations, they would certainly find that TEV expresses "an acute and well-stocked sensibility," one as "acute" as anything to be found in *n + 1* or any other literary journal. On many blogs, "sensibility" emerges cumulatively, over a longer stretch of shorter posts. Regular readers of *The Elegant Variation* surely know quite well what kind of writing and writers Mark Sarvas admires and why he admires them. If Gessen and Roth don't want to put in the time required to become acquainted with this or that blogger's

sensibility, so be it. But their blanket assertions that "litblogs" don't engage in seriously-intended commentary about books and literature is just factually incorrect.

Still, it does seem to me that too many litblogs do settle for the link/quote/quip style without adding anything substantial or distinctive to the conversation about current literary developments. There's a great deal of overlap, too many bloggers linking to the same items who don't have the same powers of aphoristic insight as Mark Sarvas, or who just contribute to the creation of a real enough kind of herd mentality emanating from a large enough part of the litblogosphere. To some extent, this may be what the "Blog Reflex" is trying to get at, however much its authors made this point difficult to debate because of the deliberately hostile way in which it was expressed. If so, I can accept the implicit critique even if it was manifestly overgeneralized and needlessly contemptuous (as were Gessen and Roth's further comments at *The Millions*, *TEV*, and *The Valve*.)

On the other hand, this criticism really only applies if the litblogs in question truly do aspire to participate in the larger, more nationally focused discourse about books, to be part of some broader effort to rival, even replace, traditional print publications. And obviously many of them don't. They're content to provide links to a smaller circle of congenial readers and to engage in what is sometimes sneeringly referred to as "book chat." I'm not much interested in such chat myself, but it's only when this kind of book discussion, whether online or in print (where it most certainly does occur) passes itself off as rigorous criticism (or itself sneers at actual literary criticism) that I look at it askance. And I don't know why Keith Gessen and Marco Roth would puff themselves up with indignation over these blogs, either. They're not propping up the capitalist order, and they encourage people to read.

I do worry about the ways in which litblogs, especially the more well-known and influential ones, have in effect established a too cozy relationship with the "book business." Thus the question asked by G & R—"Why should publishers pay publicists and advertise in book supplements when a community of native agents exists who will perform the same service for nothing and with an aura of indie-cred?"—is well worth the posing. Certainly publishers have not stopped employing publicists and advertising in book reviews, but I am uncomfortable with the speed with which literary weblogs transformed themselves from quasi-outsider sources of literary debate into friendly partners with book publishers and other affiliates of the book

business. I myself do indeed accept review copies from a number of publishers—and sometimes solicit them—but I never state or imply that I intend to review a book no matter my ultimate response to it, and especially don't promise a favorable review. (This seems to me the likely policy Gessen and Roth follow in their own consideration of publisher-provided copies.) The vast majority of books I have received in this way I have not mentioned on this blog at all. I'll review/discuss a book if it raises issues I otherwise want to discuss or if I am overwhelmingly impressed with it.

The best kind of relationship between bloggers and publishers is that described by Mark Thwaite at *The Book Depository*:

The blogosphere is a conversation. And the first thing publishers need to do is to join that conversation, not seek to dominate it. How do they do that? Well, they get a blog and they start blogging! But I'd recommend that they don't simply use the blog as a publicity blog. . .

To get the most out of their blog, publishers need it to be a genuine part of the wider conversation about books that is the blogosphere, but one that just happens to be hailing from a place that also happens to publish books. . .

In other words, the publishers should come to the blogosphere, not the other way around.

But I also think that Gessen and Roth are mistaken to assert that what litbloggers really want from their interactions with publishers and their consideration of particular books is "recognition" measured in "hits." I can remember the earlier days of the litblogosphere—before "mainstream" recognition came our way and we were courted by book publishers in the first place—when it was true that links from other bloggers—at that time our numbers were considerably fewer—were highly prized, a sign that your blog was accepted into the "self-sustaining community," as G & R put it. But that time has long passed. The kind of incestuous cross-blogging for which litbloggers were originally (and sometimes justifiably) criticized essentially disappeared once litblogs began to draw wider attention. Most of the ur-litblogs report their news and views from sources that are as unimpeachably newsworthy as anything *n + 1* itself surveys. These blogs no longer need the click-throughs that pump up one's hit count,

anyway, but I nonetheless believe that even those of us in the lower-rent districts, who do benefit from the links we still occasionally get from the plusher quarters, are not fishing for links and do not blog primarily for recognition and to secure our "niches."

If the *n + I* critique of blogs is that they trivialize the discussion of literature, I can't agree. The rise of litblogs has been, on the whole, a positive development for serious book discussion. If, however, the charge is that sometimes litblogs focus on trivialities, I think the allegation has some merit. The year-end obsession with "best-of" lists (shared, of course, with mainstream print publications) almost makes me want to stop reading litblogs during the month of December, and the constant monitoring of prizes and awards doesn't do much for me, either. I could not have had less interest in the most recent "tournament of books." But ultimately such annoyances are more than balanced by the enhanced attention to fiction and poetry litblogs have cumulatively brought to bear and by the possibilities for new forms of criticism they continue to promise. Perhaps if the editors of *n + I* themselves paid more attention to the whole range of literary weblogs that are now available (and not just to the mentioning of their own names in the most prominent of blogs), they would come to see that as well.

A Critical Mass of Critics

Cynthia Ozick makes at least one very important point in her essay, "Literary Entrails," in the April, 2007 *Harper's Magazine*:

. . .in searching for the key to the Problem of the Contemporary Novel (or Novelist), there are cupboards where it is useless to look. And there are reasons that do not apply: writers vying for the highest rung of literary prestige; potential readers distracted by the multiplicity of storytelling machines. Feuds and jealousies are hardly pertinent [e.g., Ben Marcus vs. Jonathan Franzen], and the notorious decline of reading, while incontrovertible, may have less to do with the admittedly shaky situation of literary fiction than many believe. The real trouble lies not in what is happening but in what is not happening.

What is not happening is literary criticism.

Unfortunately, Ozick isn't very precise in explaining what she means by "literary criticism," beyond conjuring up a critic possessing "a powerfully persuasive, and pervasive, intuition for how [novels] are connected, what they portend in the aggregate, how they comprise and color an era." Even more unfortunately, she doesn't bother to bring poetry within the purview of criticism, which might have forced her to identify those elements of the critic's task that take criticism beyond taxonomy ("how novels are connected"), which is an important but by no means sufficient activity, and beyond noting what an era's fiction "portends," how it "colors" its time and place, which seems to me to be the job of sociologists and historians, not literary critics reading individual novels (and poems) carefully and insightfully, giving other readers a sense of what a particularly dedicated reader experienced while attending closely to the text. The most effective critics also bring a familiarity with literary history to bear on the text at hand, but simply pointing out "connections" and keeping track of the "aggregate" won't really do.

Ozick invokes James Wood, apparently now almost everyone's default setting for the category "critic," as an exemplar of the kind of criticism she presumably has in mind, but she quotes some of his more pompous, oracular pronouncements—"Belief is a mere appendix to magic, its unused organ. This is a moral problem" [referring to the work of Toni Morrison]—rather than any specific instance of critical analysis that might help us actually read the text more efficaciously, as opposed to admiring the critic's cute phrase-making or joining in on his moral sanctimony. Wood does frequently enough mix in plausible analysis with his moralizing, but it would seem that Ozick prefers his rhetorical posturing to his usable criticism.

Nevertheless, Ozick is right to distinguish between "literary criticism" and most book reviews and between literary criticism and academic criticism. While some book reviewers are also skillful critics (Sven Birkerts, Louis Menand, Daniel Mendelsohn) able to use the book review form to more precisely critical ends, Ozick is right to maintain that the judgments of book reviewers, even reviewers who are themselves writers, are too often "capricious," too often constrained by the formulaic structure of the book review. She is also accurate in her description of "advanced" academic criticism as limited by its "confining ideologies, heavily politicized and rendered in a kind of multi-syllabic pidgin," reducing literature to dogma. (One can only hope that she is correct in predicting such criticism is "destined to vanish like the fog [it evokes].") The success of academic criticism in appropriating "criticism" to itself, however much it has

devolved into an insular discourse that long ago left any real interest in literature far behind, has created a situation in which the brief newspaper/magazine review has to suffice as "literary criticism." Ozick justifiably calls for the development of "a broad infrastructure, through a critical mass of critics," for the more amply developed kind of criticism she at least gestures toward in this essay.

This perceived need for a renewal of criticism is where I myself began when creating this blog. To some extent, I have become only more aware of how the absence of such criticism, less deadline-driven and publishing-centered, has created a situation like the one Scott Esposito describes:

Enough with the mad rush of literature where we barely have time to contemplate spring's hot titles before summer assaults us with its books. Why not linger over those spring books (and the winter ones as well), think about them a little longer, say something about them that will last past the end of the year?. . . (*Conversational Reading*)

Such a "mad rush" of superficial discussion can only result in a brand of reviewing that emphasizes the trendy and ephemeral, that elevates the "book business" and its trivialities over the long-term consideration of books that more people ought to read, of books that might even stand the test of time and still be read a generation from now, not just next year. One thing Ozick overlooks in her discussion of the current state of criticism is exactly where good literary criticism might appear. Certainly newspapers and magazines are not suddenly going to publish more of it. The current effort by the NBCC to "save" the book section at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* is not likely to succeed, and if it did wouldn't make much of a difference--I can't remember the last time I read the AJC's book reviews with any seriousness. Literary quarterlies might usefully devote more of their space to criticism, but that really hasn't been happening very much, either.

In starting this blog (and joining up with other literary blogs in implicitly attempting to create a "broad infrastructure" of serious literary discussion), I was making a judgment that the blog post could come to approximate (in a perhaps more condensed form) if not replace the critical essay—the available forums for which have long been dwindling in number—as the vehicle for "literary criticism." Not only could an individual post attempt critical readings of

various kinds and lengths, but that post could be linked to other posts (both of one's own, and of others considering the same subjects) in a kind of chain of critical discussion. I still believe that literary blogs can perform this function (especially since numerous other bloggers have since appeared taking what seems to be the same approach), although Cynthia Ozick either hasn't considered this option or shares the same blinkered attitude to online discourse expressed by Michael Dirda, Keith Gessen, etc. Her one mention of blogs is dismissive, as she refers to "blogging and emailing and text-messaging" as among the distractions the younger generations have succumbed to. I assume she's one of the print fetishists who can't imagine serious literary debate occurring online.

But I can't share either her snobbery or her conviction that, whether serious criticism survives or not, "novels will be written, whatever the conditions that roil around them." I think the existence of literary criticism is a necessary condition of the survival of both fiction and poetry. Without thoughtful discussion of what's being done by interesting writers, as well as continued discussion of what's been done in the past, "novels" as a form of "literature" will descend into further irrelevance. With no one to argue over what makes writing "literary" in the first place, or why such a concept even matters, novels will at best be only the first step in developing the script for the possible movie so many novels already want to be. Unless folks like Cynthia Ozick think rigorous print-based criticism is going to make a miraculous comeback in newspapers and magazines whose editors suddenly come to their senses and seek to safeguard the literary tradition, she ought to contemplate the possibility that "pixels" can form words and paragraphs and essays just as readily as ink.

I've Been Thinking

What I take most from Sven Birkerts's contribution to the anti-blog campaign ("Lost in the Blogosphere" *Boston Globe*, July 29, 2007) is that there are some critics who have so utterly fetishized ink-on-paper, or who are so thoroughly invested in "print" and its "biases and hierarchies" (Birkerts's own words) that they will attach themselves to the last sheet of paper passing through the last printing press before they will turn to the pixel as an alternative. (At which point they will no doubt endorse it as if their protests had never been never uttered, since where else are they going to go?)

Birkerts has been worrying over the transformation of print-based reading into digital-based reading for quite a long time now, so he is probably more entitled than most of the other blog-bashers to question the value of literary blogs. And his criticism is less that any particular blogs are deficient in critical standards or acumen than that the blogosphere as a whole is not able to provide "authority and accountability," which are apparently Birkerts's bottom-line criteria for worthwhile literary criticism. For Birkerts, there is an inherent, metaphysical difference between print and blog that makes the former not just superior but absolutely crucial in maintaining anything that could be called "literary life" at all.

Suffice it to say I find this notion absurd. Birkerts proceeds according to a number of fixed assumptions that to me are not fixed at all. One is that blogs are "predatory" on print sources. This is, of course, the same old charge that's been leveled against blogs since they first began to threaten the hegemony of print, and where litblogs are concerned, it becomes less true with every passing day and with every new litblog that comes to my attention. Increasingly, litblogs use print articles as a jumping-off point for further commentary that has much more in mind than simply pointing readers to the source. This sort of thing has long gone on in academic criticism, which often similarly uses previously published commentary as a touchstone, something that motivates additional commentary, a response that broadens the critical discussion. Journalists and book reviewers, it would seem, are not to be responded to in this way. Their words have Authority.

Another such assumption is that the blogosphere is "fluid," a "slipstream" in which the unwary reader can get too easily "lost," whereas print book reviews provide an "echoing wall" back from which "the sounds produced by individual writers and thinkers are returned as a larger coherence." I suppose it is possible to become entirely passive when navigating the blogosphere, letting the links and cross-references lull you into a critical somnolence, but I don't quite see why this is inherently a feature of blog-reading. Couldn't you pull yourself out of the "slipstream" and exert some critical intelligence of your own? Couldn't you muster up some "coherence" yourself, rather than waiting for some "authority" to provide it? Besides, the days when most blogs provided primarily links are coming to an end, for the reasons I indicated above. The free-standing blog post, without "predatory" designs on print sources (or in which such sources are themselves "supplements" to the post), will only become more common. (Are in fact already

common: many of the blogs listed on my blogroll consistently feature these kinds of linkless posts.) At the very least, there's no reason to believe that the "slipstream" defines the blogosphere, except insofar as there are many good blogs, and you could get "lost" trying to keep track of them.

Perform a thought experiment: Sven Birkerts publishes one of his reviews on his own blog rather than in one of the newspaper book review sections. Does it thereby get lost in the slipstream, its content too "fluid" to manifest "authority and accountability"? Does it automatically lose its authority? Having "New York Times" stamped on it is what finally confers authority, regardless of how compelling the review is in and of itself? Is literature really well-served by this specious, artificially-induced authority?

Predictably enough, "editing" has its role to play in the print world of authority and accountability:

The implicit immediacy and ephemerality of "post" and "update," the deeply embedded assumption of referentiality (linkage being part of the point of blogging), not to mention a new of-the-moment ethos among so many of the bloggers (especially the younger ones) favors a less formal, less linear, and essentially unedited mode of argument. While more traditional print-based standards are still in place on sites like *Slate* and the online offerings of numerous print magazines, many of the blogs venture a more idiosyncratic, off-the-cuff style, a kind of "I've been thinking . . ." approach.

I really don't understand why Birkerts would so directly oppose "editing" and "thinking." I myself, I now admit, do a fair amount of "editing" of my own posts. I try to put them together with some care. But I edit precisely to clarify my thinking, enhance my thinking, not to erase all signs of its taking place. If it nevertheless comes off as "idiosyncratic," so be it. I'd rather encounter the idiosyncrasies of writers thinking through the implications of their responses to books they've read than most of the book reviews published according to "traditional print-based standards," if what I see in most of the Sunday book reviews are the fruits of these standards. Birkerts's "authority and accountability" and Gary Kamiya's "distance and objectivity and humility" are just self-justifying buzzwords invoked by writers who seem increasingly desperate to differentiate themselves from anarchic bloggers who won't hold themselves "accountable" to the powers that be (and who might be in the process of stealing their audience).

Ultimately, Birkerts wants to preserve a space for "unhurried thinking," a phrase he takes from Cynthia Ozick's recent essay on the decline of literary criticism. I do too, but I can't say I think he makes a very good case that the conventional book review as practiced in mainstream book review sections is a good forum for this kind of thinking. Some good critics (Birkerts frequently enough among them) are able to exhibit considered judgment and unhurried thinking in their reviews, but by and large the newspaper book review is a lost cause, done in by the consumerist approach increasingly adopted by most newspapers and by editorial myopia. Not much thinking at all goes on in most newspaper reviews, just rote plot summaries and stale recitations of received wisdom.

In my opinion, "unhurried thinking" is more likely to be cultivated in literary blogs than in the dwindling pages of newspapers and magazines. Bloggers have no imposed deadlines, no restrictions on the kinds of books that can be discussed, no need to stick to the stifling conventions of "literary journalism." As Frank Wilson (himself the editor of a newspaper review section) puts it in his own response to Birkerts, "Nothing is stopping anybody from being unhurried in their thinking, letting their views ripen, so that no nuance is released before its time - and posting the results online when they feel ready to. Just because the Web allows one to do things quickly doesn't mean that everything done there must be done quickly." The "fluidity" about which Birkerts complains can just as easily be channeled into productive chains of discussion that far surpass print book reviews in both depth and breadth and that will establish their own kind of "authority." Litbloggers don't have to be "accountable" to editors or to Sven Birkerts or to anyone else beyond the curious readers who can regard literary weblogs as "echoing walls," or can just go with the flow.

Long, Thoughtful, Patient, Deliberate

Much of Steve Wasserman's *Columbia Journalism Review* article, "Goodbye to All That," is concerned with delineating newspapers' obligation to cover "books as news that stays news." He suggests that this means reviewing books "of enduring worth," which in turn suggests an emphasis on work of inherent literary value. I think most people would understand this to signify specifically works of literature—fiction and poetry, although some occasional works of nonfiction might also be included as achieving "enduring worth" as well. Indeed, in further

identifying "news that stays news," Wasserman asserts that "It is through the work of novelists and poets that we understand how we imagine ourselves and contend with the often elusive forces—of which language itself is a foremost factor—that shape us as individuals and families, citizens and communities. . . ."

But in his otherwise cogent enough defense of "serious criticism" in newspapers and other general-interest print publications, Wasserman doesn't really focus with much particularity on literary criticism. It is more or less conflated with discussion of "books" more generally, as if the latest academic tome on American foreign policy or most recent biography of William Randolph Hearst were equally the subject of "criticism" as a new novel by Richard Powers or new collection of poems by John Ashbery. As if the "news" conveyed by *The 9-11 Commission Report* were the same kind of news conveyed by *Falling Man*.

In fact, what Wasserman really has in mind is the kind of social analysis or cultural criticism described by Leon Wieseltier (as quoted by Wasserman): the "long, thoughtful, patient, deliberate analysis of questions that do not have obvious or easy answers." While most good novels do not offer "obvious or easy answers," I don't think it's the interpretation of fiction that Wieseltier has in mind here. Novels might sometimes provide grist for the cultural critic's rhetorical mill, but ultimately "criticism" as Wasserman and Wieseltier understand it is an "elite" discourse through which learned commentators discuss the cultural, political, and historical forces bearing down on "society" as it is reflected in all forms of expression. (I don't object to learned commentary per se, but I do like my learned commentary on literature to be about literature.) As Wasserman himself puts it, "the fundamental idea at stake in a novel—in the criticism of culture generally—is the self-image of society: how it reasons with itself, describes itself, imagines itself." It is the critic's role to sketch out this "self-image of society."

Suffice it to say I don't have much use for this conception of the critic's role, at least not if we're going to persist in calling such a critic a "literary" critic. It's telling that Wasserman singles out *The New York Review of Books* and *The New Republic* as exemplars of the kind of reviewing practice to which he aspired when the editor of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (and presumably still does). As Michael Orthofer has recently pointed out, and as I have argued previously, the NYROB (for a long time now) and TNR (increasingly) have more or less abandoned the task of reviewing fiction on any consistent basis. Only the most highly promoted,

"big" novels, or novels by already established "big" authors get reviewed in these publications, and, especially in NYROB, the reviews are usually quite perfunctory, given length only by the tedious practice of dwelling on biographical details or surveying the author's career in an equally apathetic fashion. While both NYROB and TNR have sizable reputations for their supposedly weighty reviews and critical commentary, most of the weight comes precisely from discussions of books, mostly nonfiction, that illustrate how society "reasons with itself, describes itself," etc. (some might say it comes from the intensity of the commentators' own self-regard), not from "long, thoughtful, patient, deliberate" analyses of works of fiction or poetry.

Thus the whole ongoing debate about whether "serious criticism" can take place online or only in print is at best a red herring. Very little serious criticism of literature takes place in print to begin with, aside from the conventional, mechanical book-report review, which Wasserman concedes is, on the whole, "shockingly mediocre" as carried out by most American newspapers. "The pabulum that passes for most reviews is an insult to the intelligence of most readers," he writes. "One is tempted to say, perversely, that its disappearance from the pages of America's newspapers is arguably cause for celebration." The question is, at least for me, not whether print is superior to pixels or whether the online medium can sustain serious literary criticism, but whether there is or will be such criticism available at all to those who want more than the "pabulum" spiced up as criticism to be found in newspapers or the "long, thoughtful" exercises in fake wisdom on display at the "premiere" mainstream print journals

This is why I still hold out hope that blogs, or whatever subsequent online forms they might morph into, can serve as sites offering "serious criticism" of literature, both canonical and contemporary (but maybe especially the latter). Print may or may not be the more adequate medium for the kind of long and thoughtful meditation Wasserman and Wieseltier obviously prefer, but since newspapers are only offering less and less space for such efforts, and since print magazines and journals seem to favor the meandering "think pieces" over focused literary analysis, those of us who would simply like to see both contemporary literature and literary criticism continue to flourish don't really have the luxury of waiting for print editors to see the light or for would-be literary critics to quit noodling around. If blogs are attracting people, both writers and readers, who are enthusiastically engaged in discussions of literature, then I can't see

any reason why the literary weblog or the online literary journal (or both together) can't be credible forums for "serious criticism."

The recent spate of articles deploring online discourse have raised various objections to this notion. The most easily dismissed is the assertion that criticism requires "authority" on the part of the critic and that blogs are too numerous and too dispersed to acquire such authority. While I can agree with Wasserman or with Richard Schickel that not every critical opinion is worthy of respect unless backed up with accompanying support and analysis (in Schickel's case, a point articulated in an essay mostly lacking either), there's nothing that automatically confers authority on a book review or critical commentary simply because it appears in print or that detracts from that authority because it appears online. Wasserman claims to agree with this ("content rules"), but also apparently accepts the further claim that most litblogs don't attempt such criticism, anyway, and that they lend themselves primarily to a cacophony of strident voices. Rohan Maitzen confesses that she, too, held such a view (actually she acknowledges she had no idea that blogs engaged in "serious criticism" even existed, a state of knowledge she also, as it turns out, shared with Schickel and Wasserman) but now, she writes: "I've been reading through the archives of some lively blog debates related to my own questions about the terms and tendencies of contemporary academic literary criticism. . . Following the long chains of arguments and rebuttals, examples and counter-examples, I'm struck with a familiar sense of futility: when so much has been said by so many so often, what can I hope to add? I'm also struck, though, by just how unaware I was that conversations of quite this kind were going on" (*Novel Readings*).

Another objection, one that clearly underpins Steve Wasserman's essay, is that criticism must be "long" before it is "thoughtful" and since blogs by their very nature can't accommodate lengthy analysis they can't be thoughtful. It is still probably an open question whether the blog form will allow for the kind of analysis Wasserman has in mind (this will be settled at least as much by readers as by writers, depending on whether we overcome the "screen fatigue" that some readers profess to develop with longer forms of online prose), but it is certainly true there is no defensible case to be made that that sort of analysis is impossible on blogs. However, if blog detractors were to sample, say, the shorter posts sometimes offered by Steve Mitchelmore (*This Space*) or on a regular basis by Jonathan Mayhew, they would surely see that "deliberate

analysis" can occur in shorter, more compacted blog posts as readily as in the conventionally drawn-out critical essays they champion. Mayhew's deliberately condensed bursts of insight are more discerning about poetry than almost anything else I read. Bloggers like these just may demonstrate in the long run that "thoughtful" literary criticism doesn't always have to be "long" and that the "patience" requested by certain windy critics might not really be worth the time.

A final objection lodged against literary blogs is that the kind of reading they encourage is too frenetic, that the hyperlinks they provide make them hyperactive. Such skipping hither and yon interrupts the cogitative process, turns critical analysis into a game of tag, a cross-blog competition for links. To me, however, the interactive and recursive features of blogs are their most valuable and distinctive, the features most likely to result in the internet/blogosphere making a real contribution to literary criticism. Of course they can be used as excuses for gossip, shortcuts to thinking, or for cheap self-aggrandizement, but ultimately their additional, more purposeful potential for exploring implications and extending lines of thought will surely be exploited more fully as well. Links, whether external to other sites considering in-common subjects and themes or internal to archived posts representing previously-expressed thoughts on a given issue, provide an opportunity to extend debate and reintroduce relevant ideas in new contexts. This sort of experience, by which one is led to parallel analyses and direct response, often without having expected to encounter such a vigorous exchange of views, is one I have myself increasingly come to appreciate in my own reading of literary blogs, and I would like to think that blog skeptics, if they bothered to investigate what good literary blogs actually have to offer, would eventually themselves find this form of critical discourse as substantial and satisfying as I do.

Read This!

The Litblog Co-op is closing down, mainly because so many of its members have become so preoccupied with their own blogs, as well as other literary endeavors that in some cases their blogs helped to make possible, that they could not devote the kind of time and attention required to keep a loosely-affiliated group like the LBC functioning adequately. The LBC was formed with a specific mission to highlight books that weren't being discussed much, or at all, in mainstream book sections by putting the collective authority of the then better-known

literary weblogs behind the selection of one book per quarter the group believed was worth readers' attention.

I'd like to take the LBC's dissolution as an opportunity to not only reflect on its success in highlighting such books but also on the evolution of the literary blog from the time (actually only 3-4 years ago) when "literary weblog" seemed merely a peculiar conjunction of words to the present moment, when the litblog has become sufficiently established that numerous print-based critics have attacked literary blogs for encroaching on their territory (the gates to which they apparently intend to keep).

When I discovered what I would identify as the original group of self-identified literary weblogs—*Maud Newton*, *The Literary Saloon*, *Moorish Girl*, *Golden Rule Jones*, *The Elegant Variation*, *The Return of the Reluctant*, a few others—I had for a while wondered why there was not more web-based literary discussion and criticism, since such discussion on the internet could be both more widely disseminated and more up-to-date than what was published in magazines, most of which had actually been moving away from providing their content online—or even in newspapers, only a very few of which printed literary-related commentary on a semi-regular basis, anyway. What I found on these ur-litblogs was, if not fully worked-out literary criticism, an obvious enthusiasm about books and an admirable interest in serious fiction. As a lapsed academic, I was especially pleased to find such an interest among people who, in most cases, were not academics, since living in the world of the academy can lead one to suspect there are no serious readers of serious fiction outside its insulated walls.

My alienation from academe was in part a reaction against the prevailing modes of academic criticism, which in my view had essentially abandoned literature in favor of critical approaches that were mostly just a way of doing history or sociology by other means. I had pursued a Ph.D in literary study in order to study literature, not to validate my political allegiances on the cheap, or to study something called "culture," an artifact of which literature might be considered but given no more emphasis than any other cultural "expression." I was looking to find a way to write literary criticism that continued to focus on the literary qualities of literature, and to that end had published several critical essays in publications that would still print such efforts when I happened upon the literary weblogs I have mentioned. I soon enough concluded there was no reason the literary blog could not accommodate a form of literary

criticism—longer than the typical kind of post I was seeing on the extant litblogs but shorter than the conventional scholarly article or long critical essay. Trying out these possibilities has been the ongoing project of this blog over the now four years of its existence.

At a time when still print-bound critics and book reviewers seem to be handing off a rhetorical baton in their eagerness to keep ahead of the perceived threat posed by literary blogs, it is rather difficult to recall how thoroughly marginal to the established critical discourse the literary weblog was in the first months and years of its existence. Among the criticisms that were directed at literary blogs in this initial stage of audience-building was the accusation they were too insular, too preoccupied with linking to each other in a kind of in-group celebration. And indeed there was a good deal of cliquish cross-linking, but this was mostly, it seemed to me, a function of the litblog's presumed marginality, a way of creating a community of engaged readers—the early bloggers were readers first of all—who could communicate their interests, insights, and enthusiasms to like-minded others. While most of us exploring the boundaries of the new medium were surely hoping our posting might attract a wider audience, I don't think many anticipated such a dramatic increase in attention paid to litblogs as did indeed occur. (The suddenness of this increase can be illustrated by the fact that as recently as BEA 2005, efforts by the then just-created Litblog Co-op—specifically by LBC mastermind Mark Sarvas—to interest the powers that be at the BEA in a panel discussion of literary blogs were rebuffed because few people associated with the event had heard of literary blogs.)

The Litblog Co-op was created during the first wave of interest in literary weblogs from beyond the small corner of the blogosphere litbloggers and their initial audience had staked out for themselves—a few notices in newspapers, links from more established, non-literary blogs, comments from "name" authors and critics increasingly showing up on various litblogs. As I recall it, the LBC aimed to accomplish two related goals: to bring attention to small-press books and less-known writers, and, implicitly, to raise the profile of literary weblogs even higher, to make them, through the authority the LBC might acquire from its selections, more of an accepted presence in the national conversation about books and writers. These were both entirely laudable goals, one directed toward showcasing alternatives to the fiction most loudly celebrated by the "book business," one directed toward providing alternative sources of discussion and debate about current fiction.

I'd have to say that our success in accomplishing the first goal was mixed. Several books that received little or no attention in the mainstream review pages did get some exposure as LBC nominees. Some of these were books by first-time authors, while others were by more veteran authors (some in translation) whose previous work had not gotten them the recognition they might have deserved. However, I don't think the LBC was ultimately able to establish itself as an authoritative guide to small-press books and overlooked fiction, judging by the degree of notice taken of our selections by blogs not themselves part of the LBC or by the literary community more generally, as well as by the number of comments most of the postings on the LBC blog received. The LBC's Read This! selections just never seemed to achieve the status with readers of current fiction that they were originally meant to achieve.

I believe that one explanation for this failure is that the LBC never really recovered from the disappointment spawned by its very first selection, a more or less mainstream work of "literary fiction" that had already been widely reviewed and whose selection seemed to many (including me) to be inconsistent with the LBC's stated mission. This selection perhaps indicated that the LBC was going to be business as usual, choosing the same old books published by the same old publishers and reviewed in the same old high-profile book reviews. Our subsequent selections mostly demonstrated that this was not the case, but it may be that an impression was left that the LBC wasn't quite the champion of unduly neglected fiction it was claiming to be.

It may also be that, eventually at least, the Litblog Co-op was perceived as a too narrowly-constituted, "clubbish" sort of group. When the LBC was formed, it could plausibly claim to represent the "leading" literary weblogs, but the litblogosphere has so dramatically expanded, both in sheer numbers of blogs and in the quality of the posting to be found there, that it really could no longer assert itself as the collective voice of the preeminent litbloggers. The LBC did enlarge its membership, and continued to invite new members when places became available, but this only made the process of nominating titles, choosing a favorite, and posting on the ultimate selection increasingly unwieldy, and it would have only gotten worse if we'd expanded the membership once again. When the litblogosphere was a fairly self-contained space, populated by bloggers united by a desire to identify worthy books and confer a kind of "indie" credential to these books, it was still possible for the member bloggers of the LBC to consider

themselves the vanguard of a new online literary movement, but by now such a claim just isn't credible.

As for the second goal of bringing more attention to literary weblogs, there is no doubt that litblogs have established themselves as part of literary culture, but I don't really think this was a direct result of the actions of the Litblog Co-op. Perhaps the existence of the LBC did contribute to the increase of weblogs dedicated to literature, both past and present, but it was only a modest factor among those that led more readers to litblogs and ultimately led some of them to become litbloggers. I think it's probable that the individual members of the LBC did more to make the litblogosphere an accepted source of information about and judgment of current fiction on their own blogs than did the LBC itself. It's likely that a given title can be exposed to a potential audience just as effectively when two or three or more individual bloggers discover it and consider its merits as when it is in effect made the winner of a competition conducted by some such organization as the Litblog Co-op.

In this way the LBC may have unwittingly performed at least one useful service. Its relatively brief existence, and the reasons for its brevity, suggests that probably there will be no online version of the National Book Critics Circle, no self-appointed arbiters of literary value on the net to rival the NBCC and other print-based critics' associations that exist mainly to bestow awards. This does not mean the litblogosphere, for example, cannot wield the authority represented by these kinds of groups, but it does mean that whatever authority literary blogs do attain will be much more widely dispersed, not concentrated in organized groups pretending to encompass the "best" available judgment about current fiction or poetry. Since there is no such "best" judgment, just as the books chosen as "best" by the NBCC, The National Book Awards, or, indeed, the Litblog Co-op are no such thing (except by accident), readers will need to find the litblogs that consistently examine the sorts of books they find they like to read. This may result in a further fracturing of the litblogosphere into zones of "niche" interest, but this will only reflect an already existing diversity of taste and preference and will hardly lead to the destruction of a "common" literary culture, the existence of which is and always was a myth.

I expect the litblogosphere to continue to grow. I especially expect an increase in blogs offering longer-form commentary and criticism, as opposed to the link-centered blog that defined the literary weblog in its first years of existence but that by now has become just one kind of

litblog among others. The more that literary blogs become credible contributors to critical/literary discourse, the less will be the need of an organization like the Litblog Co-op, or for any other effort to unite bloggers on behalf of the literary blog as a medium for serious literary discussion. Considering that all signs point to a decline in literary coverage in newspapers and magazines, I still believe the time may come when blogs and other forms of online publishing will dominate the literary discussion. If so, the LBC will have played some short-term role in underscoring the potential of literary weblogs, although their long-term potential is still to be tested.

Entering the Public Sphere

The increase in numbers of what are still generally called "literary weblogs" has been really quite astonishing. When I started this blog 4 1/2 years ago, there were a few dozen such blogs, perhaps 15-20 of them blogs I tried to read regularly. (I still think of these as the "original" literary blogs, and many if not most of them are still around.) By now, there are so many literary weblogs, approaching all genres of writing, literary news and the publishing business, and the role of literary criticism and book reviewing from so many different angles and to so many different purposes that the very term "literary weblog" does seem hopelessly imprecise. And even if one wanted to keep up with all the blogs that concern themselves in one way or another with literature or criticism, that would now be almost impossible.

Some of the new blogs that have appeared in the last couple of years, in particular blogs such as *Paper Cuts*, *The Book Bench*, and *The Book Room*, all sponsored by various print publications, have not, in my opinion, contributed much to the development of the litblog as a medium, however. These blogs have only reinforced the most reductive and stereotyped views of the litblog as a source of superficial chitchat and literary gossip. Few of the posts on these blogs explore any issue in depth or examine any particular book with even cursory specificity. There is no attempt to provoke cross-blog critical discussion, either vis-a-vis specific posts or generically—of the blogs I have named, only *The Book Bench* even includes a blogroll, and it is very short and limited to the usual suspects. Whatever links that are provided are to the same old mainstream media stories to which so many other blogs are also linking and which, of course, ultimately only reinforces the supposed first-order authority of the kinds of print publication

hosting the blogs in question. I don't know if I would go so far as to speculate that these newspaper and magazine-centered blogs are deliberately working to undermine the potential authority of literary blogs by creating examples demonstrating their vapidness, but the concept of the "litblog" they embody surely does trivialize what literary blogs have accomplished and might still accomplish.

Admittedly this concept was not created out of whole cloth by those operating these print-adjunct blogs. From the beginning, one model of the literary weblog has been the daily digest, brief entries on media-reported literary news along with links to specific news items or reviews or opinion pieces. Often enough, however, the blogger's underlying attitude toward the item at hand, the blogger's own literary sensibility, was really the point of such posts, and so even bloggers who stuck to the digest form usually managed to convey a point of view about the subject at hand--indeed, litblogs would never have captured the attention they did attract, prompting the appearance of these old-media blogs in response, if they hadn't offered a perspective on current books and other literary matters not to be found in existing media.

Nevertheless, the literary blogosphere as a whole relatively quickly progressed beyond the daily digest, and while posting became less frequent, it also became longer and more fully developed. If literary blogs have not exactly become substitutes for book reviews and critical journals, they have become sources of genuinely engaged literary discussion, ranging from conventional book reviews to both short and long-form critical analyses to full-blown scholarly essays. Combined with the ability through commenting and linking to extend critical discussion immediately and directly, the scope and the quality of literary blogs have allowed them, at least for me, collectively to supersede in interest and utility most of the remaining newspaper book review sections and those few magazines that still occasionally offer literary content.

In a post criticizing science fiction blogs for allowing "the SF blogosphere [to] become a venue for crassly commercial interests far more concerned with selling things than encouraging intelligent discussion," Jonathan McCalmont notes my own previous post distinguishing between "liblogs" and "critblogs" and suggests such a distinction is "more about retreating from the existing public sphere than it is about changing it."

I think he's probably right, although I would describe the effort to establish the category of "critblog" more as a separation of blog-centered critical writing from the necessarily ephemeral "daily digest" style of blogging than a full-on retreat from the "public sphere." Nevertheless, I share McCalmont's dismay that many litblogs have simply accommodated themselves to the "public sphere" of superficial literary discourse rather than continuing in the attempt to provide an alternative to that discourse. This is even more discouraging for "mainstream" literary fiction and criticism, since it gives in not merely to the commercialization McCalmont decries in the SF community but also to the unexamined assumptions and shallow thinking that make journalism-based commentary on "literary fiction" so crippling to begin with.

McCalmont correctly notes that

whenever commercial interests enter into a public space, they change the focus of discussion from what is good or interesting, to what is worth buying. We can see this effect in the fondness of the SF blogosphere for book covers, give-aways, recycled press releases and interviews that are far more interested in what an author has to sell than in the subtleties of their writing or world-view. By contrast, actual substantial reviews are few and far between (especially outside of specialised review sites) and when they do appear they are seldom discussed, seldom linked to and seldom responded to.

I don't know that I would say most mainstream litblogs are "far more interested in what an author has to sell than in the subtleties of their writing or world-view", but there is a distressing number of "give-aways, recycled press releases," and perfunctory interviews in the literary blogosphere as a whole, and "substantial reviews," sustained critical reflection in general, certainly are all too often "seldom discussed" in comment threads. Too much space is given over to perpetuating the "book business" status quo, reinforcing middlebrow standards and enabling market-driven reviewing practices rather than challenging and critiquing them.

Yet I do think it's ultimately pointless to expend too much energy directed at "changing" the literary public sphere, either generally ("literary journalism") or literally (the public blogosphere). Capitalism will continue to trump literary worth among the big publishers, gossip and book business fandom will continue to dominate high-profile literary discussion. Many litblogs will be swept up (have been swept up) into the publicity machine. Trying to halt all of this is as

futile as the effort to make fiction palatable to nonreaders, which is finally what motivates the existing public sphere in publishing and book reviewing in the first place.

Even so, the blog remains a useful publishing tool, and the blogosphere a valuable publishing medium. Just as it was always possible—although harder to do for financial reasons—to maintain a space for worthwhile literary criticism in print among all the reams of wasted paper that constitute the majority of what appears in print form, it is entirely possible to stake out a segment of cyberspace for nontrivial criticism, notwithstanding the possibility that what was the literary blogosphere will drift into irrelevance. The audience for such criticism might be targeted and modest in size, but such has always been the case for any literary criticism that takes itself, and the work it considers, seriously.

High-Speed-Narrative Throughput

Lev Grossman has seen the future of fiction in the digital age and has come back to tell us about it:

Like fan fiction, it will be ravenously referential and intertextual in ways that will strain copyright law to the breaking point. Novels will get longer--electronic books aren't bound by physical constraints--and they'll be patchable and updatable, like software. We'll see more novels doled out episodically, on the model of TV series or, for that matter, the serial novels of the 19th century. We can expect a literary culture of pleasure and immediate gratification. Reading on a screen speeds you up: you don't linger on the language; you just click through. We'll see less modernist-style difficulty and more romance-novel-style sentiment and high-speed-narrative throughput. Novels will compete to hook you in the first paragraph and then hang on for dear life. (*Time*)

None of this is good or bad; it just is. The books of the future may not meet all the conventional criteria for literary value that we have today, or any of them. But if that sounds alarming or tragic, go back and sample the righteous zeal with which people despised novels when they first arose. They thought novels were vulgar and immoral. And in a way they were, and that was what was great about them: they shocked and seduced people into new ways of thinking. These books will too. Somewhere out there is

the self-publishing world's answer to Defoe, and he's probably selling books out of his trunk. But he won't be for long.

There's much about Grossman's analysis that is self-contradictory: If reading quickly will be encouraged by electronic reading, why would novels get longer? If online "readers" are so averse to language, why won't they just eventually gravitate entirely to purely visual communication or entertainment, as has happened already in the transferal of interest from books to film and television? What's a more "high-speed" narrative than one without words at all? And unless Grossman sees a new form emerging from the electronic maelstrom—not prose fiction but something else—then no Daniel Defoe will appear, since Defoe helped create prose fiction itself, did much more than just call attention to himself. What Grossman describes is simply a continuation of "fiction" as we know it, only stupider. It isn't a new genre of literature, only the same one published in different ways.

Lev Grossman's abilities as seer aside, however, something like the transformed publishing environment he evokes is likely to obtain in the not-too-distant future. "Old-school" publishing will continue to fade from relevance, perhaps disappear altogether, to be replaced by less hierarchy-driven modes of publication. Most of the current gatekeepers will find their gates disassembled. The current of choices already confronting the reader of fiction will become a torrent. This new dispensation is likely to strike many of us as chaotic—Grossman is being disingenuous when he writes that "None of this is good or bad," since he surely knows most of his readers judge it to be bad indeed—especially those of us who want some of those "conventional criteria for literary value" to survive.

What Grossman apparently didn't take away from his glimpse into the future (perhaps because he fears his own place as a print-based critic will simply be washed away) is any sense of the role literary criticism might play in counteracting the New Chaos. I think it will have significant influence on the development of democratized "literary culture," arguably even more influence than criticism now has on print-centered literary culture, since an infrastructure of critblogs already exists and already focuses its attention more widely on marginalized books and presses than print book reviews ever did. Cybercriticism will probably go a long way toward meliorating the chaos lurking beneath Lev Grossman's account, even if such criticism doesn't exactly duplicate the practices of newspaper book reviews, magazines, and the few remaining

print journals. There will necessarily be a less uniform focus on the same few new titles, fewer exercises in biographical speculation masquerading as criticism, fewer critical essays that are more about the critic than the work ostensibly at issue. But otherwise there's no reason why web criticism can't carry out the sorting process in which criticism has always been engaged. The worthwhile will be separated from the worthless, the most challenging work will be identified while the jejune and the formula-riven will be duly ignored. Maybe there will be more books to keep track of, but most of them will be dispensable, anyway, and many more blogs and websites will be around to do the sorting than ever was the case with print criticism.

If I'm being overoptimistic and literary criticism fails to adapt itself effectively to these changed circumstances, the disarray implied in Grossman's speculations won't really register much, since fiction itself will no longer matter to anyone.

Justified Cruelty

One might at first assume that David Denby's short book, *Snark*, is the latest in the line of anti-Internet polemics, such as Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur* or Lee Siegel's *Against the Machine*, but it really isn't. It's a critique of media discourse more generally, and Denby focuses some of his most withering criticism on such "mainstream" journalists as Joe Queenan and Maureen Dowd. The closest he gets to targeting Internet practices per se is his citation of such gossip-centered sites as *Gawker* and *Wonkette*, both of which surely do merit their share of criticism.

Denby does, however, repeat the mantra by now chanted regularly by print journalism at large that bloggers and other anarchic inhabitants of cyberspace threaten "authority," that "agreed-upon facts and a central narrative" will disappear into the "many niches and bat caves from which highly colored points of view will fly wildly like confused vectors, and in that situation no one will be right, no one will be wrong, and everything will be a matter of opinion." (Denby and his fellow fetishists of "authority" must have an easily provoked fear that "facts," what's "right" and what's "wrong," are pretty unstable concepts to believe that a motley collection of folks publishing their thoughts from basements in Terre Haute or Sioux City could

eviscerate them so readily.) More plausibly, he asserts that the Internet has helped to proliferate an already existing tendency:

It turns out that in the wake of the Internet revolution, snark as a style has outgrown its original limited function. The Internet has allowed it to metastasize as a pop writing form. A snarky insult, embedded in a story or a post, quickly gets traffic; it gets linked to other blogs; and soon it has spread like a sneezy cold through the vast kindergarten of the Web.

The metaphorical association of Internet and disease, as well as the assignment of bloggers to their playrooms, certainly betrays a low opinion of online writing habits, but there's probably no point in denying that snark as a rhetorical strategy has gotten more widely dispersed through its use on the Internet, even in particular through its adoption by some bloggers. Here, however, a little care ought to be taken in distinguishing between honest snark—biting words that contain an element of truth and cut through the tangles of false decorum—and what Denby calls "low snark" the latter of which finally degenerates into "bilious, snarling, resentful, other-annihilating rage." The former can ultimately become wearying if such snark is the **only** mode of commentary offered up by the blogger, but the latter doesn't even rise to the level of "snark" in the first place. It's simply biliousness.

I'm not sure I've ever really run across much of this "low snark" on the blogs I read. Like many critics of the blogosphere, Denby seems particularly fixated on the comment threads that develop from many blog posts, where "low snark" perhaps does occasionally slip in. He seems to think that attracting as many comments as possible is the point of most blog posts and assumes most readers of blogs make their way dutifully through the subsequent threads, but in my experience this doesn't usually happen. Blogs that attract a modest number of considered comments can spark worthwhile give-and-take, but posts that result in hundreds of comments, as on most of the prominent political blogs, for example, are just too unwieldy, and I, for one, don't bother with the comments. Denby really gives few examples of bloggers who indulge in "low snark," and it's pretty hard to take seriously as informed criticism an analysis that takes the occasional loud-mouth comment as reason for alarm.

Denby doesn't discuss literary snark per se all that much, so it's hard to know whether he thinks the discussion of books online is as endangered by snark as a cultural style as political debate or personal interactions conducted on social networking sites. I assume he isn't really

aware of the hundreds of blogs devoted to the serious consideration of literature, as well as philosophy, history, and film and the other arts (surely he must be generally aware of his own online competition as found in film blogs) and that, far from "ruining our conversation" where literature and art are concerned, are perhaps in the process of renewing it. These blogs aren't necessarily always free from what I've called honest snark, and to this extent they might prompt him to reconsider his blanket assertion that "contemporary snark is post-aesthetic. . . produced by people living in the media who know, by the time they are twelve, the mechanics of hype, spin, and big money. Everything that isn't part of the entertainment business cycle seems lifeless and unreal to them." Certainly this description aptly fits many "people living in the media" (including some bloggers), but the sort of snark occasionally to be found in otherwise seriously-intended blog posts is often squarely aesthetic in its attempt to focus attention on issues that aren't "part of the entertainment business cycle." Snarky comment about books clearly intended to find their place in this cycle, or about "criticism" that merely observes its movements, is actually an attempt to identify the Entertainment State itself as "lifeless and unreal."

Denby does devote a couple of paragraphs to the well-known efforts of Heidi Julavits, editor of *The Believer*, to distinguish between snark and honest critical judgment, wherein, as Denby puts it, "Julavits found it hard to separate justified cruelty in criticism from mere critical showing off." By now one can say that the entire run of issues of *The Believer* has mostly been an attempt to banish "critical showing off" from its book reviews, which has, in my opinion, resulted in a style of criticism that is uniformly bland and mostly useless. The latest issue I have read (January 09) contains six reviews of 5-7 paragraphs, each of which consists almost entirely of plot summary or cursory description with a few dashes of empty praise. The usual sappy cover accurately enough signals the sort of inflated cheer that characterizes most of *The Believer's* content. (It is altogether revealing that far and away the best piece in the January issue, Gary Lutz's essay on the art of the sentence, was not commissioned by *The Believer* but is a lecture reprinted in the magazine.) If what is required to remove snark from critical discourse is the prominence of a publication like *The Believer*, I'd prefer bile and resentment—or at least more appreciation of "justified cruelty," the systematic exclusion of which only renders literary criticism toothless.

Outsourcing

Recently, Mark Athitakis published both a review of Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and a blog post supplementing that review. The review (printed in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*) is a perfectly good review of its kind—the kind limited by the newspaper's imposed limitations of space and the need to address a perceived "general" audience—but what struck me the most is how superior to the review, and ultimately more useful to readers, is the blog post.

The review does an effective job in its first paragraph of locating the new DeLillo novel in the context of his other recent work, and immediately lets the reader know it is a book worth his/her attention. What follows is three paragraphs (out of six total paragraphs) of plot summary, which succinctly enough encapsulate the "story" of *Point Omega* (succinct plot summaries not being something I normally anticipate in most newspaper reviews, it must be said) and a concluding paragraph that states the reviewer's judgment that the novel manifests an "elegance" and "an artfulness to the prose" that make it more satisfying than DeLillo's previous book.

In the blog post, Athitakis quotes the conclusion of his review, but then moves well beyond the kind of compressed commentary he is able to provide there. The first thing he does is to refer to other critical reaction to *Point Omega*, a move that is apparently forbidden in most print book reviews. The assumption seems to be that a review must be free-standing, shorn of the useful context consideration of existing commentary on a book might offer. This is a practice that only reinforces the impression of book reviewing as "lifestyle reporting" rather than actual literary criticism, and it's a shame reviewers like Athitakis are not able to engage in real critical dialogue in the reviews they write. In this case, the quotes from the other reviews he includes in his post allow him to express his dissent from prevailing views and to emphasize what he thinks is a misperception of *Point Omega*.

Athitakis then goes more deeply into what he considers the "timelessness" of DeLillo's concerns, contrary to the notion he's become preoccupied with "abstracted musings on geopolitics" since the events of 9/11/01. He suggests that "the novel's central tension isn't between war and peace or American empire and the rapidly approaching apocalypse (though DeLillo hasn't neglected those concerns), but between differing notions of what it means to be patient. How soon do you perceive somebody's disappearance as a loss? How long does it take to come around to somebody else's way of thinking? How much time is required to shift from

being concerned about humanity to being concerned about a single human being?" This analysis reflects a level of critical contemplation for which the editors of newspaper book reviews have little patience, but which this blog post presents very cogently.

It isn't that Athitakis's post is much longer than the review, but that it doesn't have to observe the numbing conventions of literary journalism as imposed on the book review. At first it seems like an afterthought to the main business represented by the review, but to me it finally comes to embody the critic's thoughts much more fully. Increasingly, blog-published reviews and criticism in general are more satisfying in this way than what can be found in print publications, especially newspapers.

In a recent Howard Kurtz column in the *Washington Post* about the disappearance of newspaper critics, Terry Teachout is quoted as maintaining that "there will always be a place for literate, well-informed drama criticism about performances taking place in Chicago or L.A. or St. Louis. You can't outsource that function." And it's not just drama criticism that will continue to need the local perspective: "It's not enough to have a reporter who says the local museum has bought a new Picasso. It's also necessary to have someone on your staff who knows whether it's museum-quality and is worth \$5 million."

Terry Teachout has long been a proponent of web-based criticism of all kinds, so I don't take his comments as the defensive posturing of an endangered critical species so common among print-based critics but as an honest assessment of the limitations of the online medium and the niche-oriented role newspaper arts coverage might continue to play. However, I still think he's not likely to prove correct in his contention that only local newspapers will be able to provide reliable commentary on local arts events.

The premise of this argument seems to be that only a reporter-critic hired by a newspaper can afford to devote the time and attention needed to survey all of the theatrical productions and art exhibitions being offered in specific cities. A further assumption is that only a few such critics with insight into Picasso's oeuvre are available and that the local newspaper is the most convenient place to put them. As Teachout puts further puts it in a post at his own blog, "blogging, valuable though it can be, is no substitute for the day-to-day attention of a newspaper

whose editors seek out experts, hire them on a full-time basis, and give them enough space to cover their beats adequately."

I can't see that either of these assumptions is warranted. I can well imagine that, absent arts critics in the local papers, any number of motivated arts enthusiasts might attempt to take up the slack through regionally-oriented blogs, or might even start up online review pages focused exclusively on the local scene (see this effort at *The Arts Fuse* already under way). Furthermore, I see no reason to believe that "literate, well informed," even "expert" critics can't be found among such enthusiasts. Surely in cities of even modest size, especially those that are home to respectable colleges and universities, there are more knowledgeable and discerning proto-critics than the bias toward print "arts journalism" otherwise allows. If the book blogosphere has demonstrated anything, it is that such capable critics do indeed exist, even if the monopoly on book commentary always exercised by newspapers and magazines obscured that fact.

It is also conceivable that book reviewing concentrating on books by writers with a local connection might become more common—indeed, as I canvass the remaining newspaper book review sections this already seems to be happening there. Perhaps these sections will hold on as sources of local literary interest, but if they do, it will likely be through reliance on the resources of local critics, precisely the cohort that could just as easily be hosting blogs. One could say that the newspaper makes these critics more readily accessible, and confers on them an inherent credibility, but eventually the best web-based criticism, both local and national, will find its audience, and the audience will find it, because readers interested enough in criticism of books and the arts to seek it out will recognize "literate, well-informed" voices when they hear them.

The Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog recently announced it is abandoning the "discussion model" to provide instead "a daily news feed with links and excerpts from other outlets around the world." This means that the site will no longer feature blog posts from a selected group of poets "discussing" poetry but will become like every other digest blog offering "news."

The PF is making this move because "The blog as a form has begun to be overtaken by social media like Twitter and Facebook. News of the poetry world now travels fastest and

furthest through Twitter. . .with the information often picked up from news aggregator sites rather than discursive blogs." Further,

. . . anyone involved in the more dynamic discussions of poetry, poetics, or politics in the past year knows that more and more of the most vibrant interactions have been found on Facebook. We saw this happening last month as our National Poetry Month posts traveled far and wide through various status updates, wall postings, and links.

I always thought the "discussion model" used at *Harriet* was a little too chatty, too often short on extended analysis, but nevertheless I checked in on the blog several times a week and usually found some posts on the practice and reading of poetry that were well worth my time. I can with some certainty say I will never look at the site again, as it now gives in to the preoccupation with the "fastest and furthest" that characterizes too much of the blogosphere. "News of the poetry world" will replace the consideration of actual poetry.

I don't know whether "the blog as a form has begun to be overtaken by social media like Twitter and Facebook," at least where serious commentary on poetry and fiction is concerned. That it has overtaken the blog as a source of quasi-public instant messaging is probably true, and to the extent this leaves the weblog as a space that might be put to use for more substantive discourse is a good thing. But why the PF would think that Twitter-type shout-outs would be better for poetry than the "discursive blog" is not something I can understand.

Is more "information" what we really need? Does the rapid-fire posting of ephemera amount to "dynamic discussions" or does it just reduce the discussion of poetry to the same relentless focus on trivia that characterizes the coverage of movies, of celebrity culture in general? What seems to me to be motivating the *Harriet* change of approach—what seems to be motivating the Twitterization of online discourse in general—is precisely the desire to see what is posted disseminated "far and wide through various status updates, wall postings, and links," not a concern for the substance of the post. The mere accumulation of friends, followers, and hits, evidence of "interaction," is the end-in-itself.

The digest form of weblog has existed from the beginnings of the blogosphere, is probably the original, most recognizable form of blog. Plenty of them still exist and provide useful "news." If Twitter now performs this function more efficiently, so be it, but that doesn't

seem to be a good reason to transform all blogs into versions of Twitter. Both poetry and fiction need more "discursive blogs" examining the news that stays news, not fewer.

It appears there are still those in mainstream media and publishing worrying over the dilution of "standards" in the era of the internet and of self-publishing. Alison Walsh at the *Irish Independent* is concerned that

In the 'anyone can do it' age, it seems that all you have to do is join a creative writing group, or upload a short story on to one of many websites, or chat to your friends on author forums and hey, presto. But while writing courses can encourage a certain standard, can make you aware of point of view and plot development, can equip you with the skills to compose something that resembles a novel, they can't make you a writer. They can't give you that extra something that lifts a work out of being just a humdrum collection of words into something special, that magic that only a very few possess. . . .

One might have thought that by now self-styled "gatekeepers" would have given up on the idea that they must retain the status they believe they possessed in the old print-only dispensation, but Ms. Walsh is sure that

what's missing from the whole 'anyone can write' idea is a yardstick of quality. The imprimatur of an experienced, skilled individual saying, 'This is good enough to be published', and lifting the standard of literature in the process.

Pretty obviously Alison Walsh is staking a claim to be such an "experienced, skilled individual," although frankly I can find no information about her that would assure me she has the qualifications or ability to determine "the standard of literature" that should be applied to the work of serious writers. Simply because someone has been designated an "editor" by a publishing company whose first priority is always profits does not at all mean that such a person knows the first thing about "literature" or what gives "quality" to writing.

Walsh herself identifies the main reason why "gatekeeping" of the sort she has in mind is a misguided enterprise when she writes that "creative talent can't be judged objectively and what one editor will rave about, another will dispatch to the wastepaper basket." Editorial gatekeeping

is at best a hopelessly subjective and uncertain enterprise that encourages the editor (who has often arbitrarily been granted power over a writer's fate) to project his/her fallible judgment as the "standard of literature." At worst it jettisons such a standard altogether in favor of commercial potential or the belief that the target audience's expectations must be met.

If anyone could be said to plausibly have a gatekeeping role it would be the literary critic (although the critic who actually calls him/herself a gatekeeper deserves whatever mockery might ensue). Indeed, what the literary world needs now is not more editors and publishers pretending to be upholding "the standard of quality" but more critics willing to expend the effort to study literature and literary history (which certainly does not require any sort of academic degree) so that judgment is grounded in some degree of knowledge, to consider works of literature comparatively, and to pay the kind of attention required to apprehend and describe what a serious literary work seems to be attempting. Only the presence of this sort of criticism can mitigate against the sort of chaos that people like Alison Walsh think will accompany the "democratization" of literature. I, for one, don't see why such a critical presence should be an unattainable goal, thus making the era of "anyone can do it" just as likely as any other to produce "quality" works of literature.

Free from Making Decisions

I've rarely read an essay whose title so inaccurately signals its content than Annie Murphy Paul's "Reading Literature Makes Us Smarter and Nicer," posted at Time.com. It is ostensibly a response to Gregory Currie's post on the *New York Times's* Opinionator blog, "Does Great Literature Make Us Better?," but in fact after quoting Currie's contention there is little evidence "that people are morally or socially better for reading Tolstoy," Paul does not discuss "literature" at all but instead moves on to make claims about the nature of reading that can't withstand scrutiny and do nothing to show that reading literary works makes us "smarter and nicer."

The bulk of her argument is a brief on behalf of "deep reading," which she then uses to attack the kind of reading she thinks the internet encourages. According to Paul

Recent research in cognitive science, psychology and neuroscience has demonstrated that deep reading — slow, immersive, rich in sensory detail and emotional and moral complexity — is a distinctive experience, different in kind from the mere decoding of words. Although deep reading does not, strictly speaking, require a conventional book, the built-in limits of the printed page are uniquely conducive to the deep reading experience. A book's lack of hyperlinks, for example, frees the reader from making decisions — Should I click on this link or not? — allowing her to remain fully immersed in the narrative.

This sort of affirmation of what is asserted to be "deep reading" has become quite common among those who think the internet has endangered it, but on a fundamental level, Paul's articulation of the claim is incoherent. The biggest problem is in the conception of "reading" (presumably fiction) to begin with. It's certainly unclear why "deep" must be equated with "slow," but even more perplexing is the notion that reading might be "rich in sensory detail" and involves "emotional and moral complexity." The only "sensory detail" that could possibly accompany the act of reading is the visual detail of words on a page encountered by the eye. Any other manifestation of sensory detail occurs in the reader's mind as he/she projects the images the writer attempts to simulate through words—but of course these images are not literally present for the reader to perceive. Similarly, "emotional and moral complexity" is not something we read, but instead create ourselves upon reflection about what we have read—probably considerably after the fact.

This alleged "deep" experience of detail and complexity Paul sums up in her use of the word "immersion," which "is supported by the way the brain handles language rich in detail, allusion and metaphor: by creating a mental representation that draws on the same brain regions that would be active if the scene were unfolding in real life." At least Paul here acknowledges that the activities of reading are psychological/neurological activities produced by the mind itself, but she also reveals that her underlying assumption about "literature" is that it essentially consists of an image-based narrative that can be followed as if "the scene were unfolding in real life." In other words, what "immersion" in a literary work amounts to is that the brain converts the text into a "mental representation" that is a lot like a movie.

Thus we are "immersed" in a book in the same way we allow our attention to be captured by the most compelling movies. Indeed, Paul describes this almost involuntary immersion as akin to "a hypnotic trance." Paul clearly believes this is a beneficial state in which to find oneself as a reader, but it's not at all clear why this would be the case. Is it really a good thing that this sort of "deep" reading "frees the reader from making decisions"? Shouldn't serious reading be an active experience that broadens our awareness rather than the passive experience that constricts it Annie Murphy Paul is offering us? Isn't reading really something very different from watching a movie, calling on entirely other human capacities?

Ultimately Paul's essay devolves into the same old simplistic celebration of print over internet, even though that has nothing at all to do with the issue Currie raises in questioning the putative moral effects of works of literature. Online reading, with its pesky decisions and constant distractions, threatens to undermine our ability to read deeply, which is really only encouraged by print, etc., etc. Curiously, after deploring the tendency of online reading to present obstacles to uninterrupted reading, Paul claims that "slow, unhurried" reading has the virtue of allowing readers time "to enrich their reading with reflection, analysis, and their own memories and opinions." What is the deflection of attention to "reflection" and the intrusion of "memories and opinions" if not distractions, wanderings away from the work at hand? Here it seems to me that Paul simply casts deep reading as a more elevated form of preoccupation with self.

Unfortunately, the whole debate on the nature of reading and on the effects of reading "literature" in particular is usually predicated on a view of literature that is reductive and misleading. Paul and Currie alike rely on a concept of literature that first of all restricts it to fiction (usually novels). Seldom included in the discussion is the experience of reading poetry, which in most cases surely can't be equated with the act of following a narrative as if it were a movie running in our heads. Its moral effects can't be based on our response to characters and their dilemmas or, as suggested by some studies of readers' responses to fiction, through our identification with their "mind." Further, the fiction considered in these discussions is usually the most conventional, story-centered and realistic sort (except when it is most obviously "mind"-centered, as in Virginia Woolf). Are we "immersed" in, say, *Finnegans Wake* or *The*

Unnameable in the same way Paul claims we are in those narratives featuring "scenes" that seem to be "unfolding in real life"?

Reading works like these would have to involve engaging "deeply" with the irreducible medium of literature, language itself. Since such works in their own deep immersion in language and its aesthetic possibilities have an even greater claim to be considered "literature" than the kind of routine narrative fiction the debate about the importance of reading usually presumes, perhaps those involved in this debate ought to devote some attention to them instead.

The Beneficent Effects of Blogging

Rohan Maitzen, herself a long-time proponent and distinguished practitioner of "academic blogging," recently wondered whether the "hope for the beneficent effects of blogging" expressed by many of the earliest champions of academic litblogging (including, it must be said, me) "fizzled out, or [was]. . . (even to a minor extent) realized." Rohan's own answer to her question is, generally, that this hope has not been realized, observing that "I haven't seen much change in the way things operate generally in the academy, and if anything, the number of bloggers actively promoting a significant shift in the way we understand scholarship and publishing seems to have declined."

I mostly agree with Rohan's assessment, at least where what could specifically be called academic blogging is concerned. She cites a few pieces written by John Holbo, the founder and editorial mastermind of *The Valve*, arguably the first academic literary blog to gain a large readership (and to which both Rohan and I were contributors), that established fairly ambitious goals for academic litblogging, although Holbo more or less advocated for litblogging as a kind of "complement" or "supplement" to academic criticism, an "informal discussion of academic work" that to a degree exists as a second-order sort of discourse that makes "academic work" more accessible. Some contributors to *The Valve* did indeed post such "bloggy" discussions of literature and literary issues (informed but informal), but there have been few if any subsequent blogs that have really attempted to emulate or extend the style of academic blogging introduced at *The Valve*. There are many academics who blog, but, by and large, not about literature.

However, my own interest in blogging always was and is in the possibilities of the blog itself as a form of critical discourse, as a mode of serious literary criticism. In creating *The Reading Experience*, I was attempting to move away from academic criticism per se and try out a different sort of approach that would retain some of the assumptions of academic criticism (as I understood them) but would assume as audience readers beyond other "specialists" in a "field." For several years it seemed to me I was having some success in this endeavor, as TRE gradually built up a fairly decent "hit count" (my page visits were never as impressive as those received by the most popular of the early litblogs, but looking back now the numbers seem prodigious) and garnered my share of external links. In addition, more and more blogs were attempting the same sort of thing I was doing (including Rohan Maitzen), and while I can by no means claim that my blog was itself the inspiration for this increase, as there were certainly other blogs contemporaneous to mine featuring criticism of substance, I think it is fair to say that the notion that a lowly blog might feature such criticism is not at all as peculiar as it might have seemed to some in 2004.

Literary blogs as well, it seems to me, prompted the rise of other websites that were not, strictly speaking, blogs but that certainly took advantage of the audience for serious book discussion blogs had helped to create. Thus, online publications such as *The Rumpus*, *the Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Open Letters Monthly* could be said to be the legitimate heirs to literary blogs (other publications, such as *The Quarterly Conversation* and *The Critical Flame*, are direct offshoots of blogs), and it really can't be denied that literary criticism and commentary online in general is much more substantive and self-sustaining than it was ten years ago. This is not to say blogs in the form they took ten years ago have carried the day as the primary source of criticism in current literary culture, but surely that culture has changed because of the rise of the literary weblog.

But in her post Rohan Maitzen expresses less concern for the present literary culture than for the institutional practices of "academic literary studies," fearing that "there has proved to be too much inertia in the larger system to which academic scholarship and publication belong" for blogging to become much of a part of that system. Undoubtedly her fear is justified. "Academic" literary blogging defined more narrowly hasn't blossomed except in isolated cases, most prominently in the kinds of posts Rohan has written on her own blog. I would argue that not only

inertia is to blame, however. It's not just that academic advancement depends on quantification of achievement (how many articles, how many books?) but that such quantification can be accomplished much more directly when the achievement is embodied in a physical object—the printed journal, the book bound between its tangible covers.

More importantly, not only are academic critics most often preoccupied with their own "area" of specialization, but these areas are usually centered around questions—historical, cultural, political, theoretical—ancillary to literature per se. Academic bloggers so often turn for subjects to the vicissitudes of the academic life itself because ultimately very many of them just aren't that interested in discussing literature.

From Pixels to Print

Sometime in 2003 I began to notice while "surfing" the internet (which then was not quite as complete in its ubiquity as it is now) certain websites focused on books and writing, generally providing brief commentary accompanied by links to reviews or articles on literary matters. Others began to appear offering somewhat more extensive commentary, and since the discussion I found on these sites—eventually I learned they were "weblogs"—clearly seemed seriously intended to call attention to new books (especially less well-publicized ones), to print-based literary criticism, and to "literature" in general, I decided to start a weblog of my own, on which I might try to determine if this new web based medium could support a longer form of literary criticism and if anybody wanted to read it. Thus I created *The Reading Experience* in January of 2004.

Among those early "litbloggers" I discovered were Steve Mitchelmore, first through a links-type blog called *Splinters* and then a blog with more extended posts called *This Space*, as well as Michael Orthofer, founder of *The Complete Review* and its attendant blog called *The Literary Saloon*. Mitchelmore's blog soon itself became an exemplar of the kind of long-form criticism (long at least for the internet) in which I was interested, and both *The Complete Review* and *The Literary Saloon* gained considerable prominence as aggregators of book reviews (including Orthofer's own, with their signature assignment of grades to each title) and of literary news more broadly, especially news about translated books. Not long after I started *The Reading*

Experience, Scott (now Veronica) Esposito began his literary weblog, *Conversational Reading*, which soon enough spun off a new online book review journal, *The Quarterly Conversation*, which in my opinion has become one of the most valuable sources of book reviews and literary criticism, online or in print.

All three of these writers ("litblogger" is no longer a term much in use, and would not adequately describe their current endeavors, anyway) have recently published books, which provides an opportunity to consider not just the contribution of the literary weblog to literary/critical discourse, but how effectively the sort of writing developed on blogs transfers to conventional books-on-paper (or at least to the "book" as traditionally conceived). Although the contents of only one of the books (Mitchelmore's) actually consists of material first offered on the writer's blog, nevertheless we can say that in each case the writer initially discovered his signature voice and approach through writing on a blog. To what extent has online writing as represented by the blog affected "writing" in general?

Steve Mitchelmore's book, *This Space of Writing*, collects and arranges many of his most representative blog posts. On the broadest level, it succeeds quite effectively in focusing his persistent concerns and developing his critical insights through consideration of specific writers and works, generally the writers for whom he has often expressed admiration on *This Space*. Readers who are familiar with Mitchelmore's critical practice through the blog will find this book a useful condensation of his ideas and sorting of his priorities, while those who are encountering those ideas and priorities for the first time in *This Space of Writing* should certainly find them provocative and passionately expressed.

Mitchelmore is from the U.K., but we don't find a lot of discussion of British fiction in these essays, with the exception of those devoted to Gabriel Josipovici, one of the few British writers Mitchelmore esteems as highly as the Continental European writers to whom he most often turns. The work of such writers as Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, and Karl Ove Knausgaard provide his critical lodestar, and certainly readers of *This Space of Writing* unfamiliar with them will get a very good introduction to these writers and to the qualities of their work that elicit such a strong response from Mitchelmore. Mitchelmore values literary works that acknowledge the essential "solitude and silence" from which they came and in which the reader also must receive them. Bernhard's and Knausgaard's books represent

attempts to open onto the space that makes narrative possible, the singularities that inscribe themselves on a life and agitate a certain enchantment, opening the past as much as the present and future, yet which cannot be made present to the work itself.

He also uses the metaphor of "horizon" to evoke the "singularity" of the experience of literature: "The reader experiences the book by descending into a literary landscape walking along a dirt path, sheltering in a dappled grove, paddling in a stream. The horizon is obscured."

It is this very obscurity that gives literature its signature value. We do not look "beyond," to the world of experience in its extension, but within to the interior landscape literature makes available. Or at least this is how I interpret Mitchelmore's tropes, since if there is an obstacle to fully benefiting from Mitchelmore's criticism it is a certain obscurity in his own concepts--or at least in the expression he gives to them. After reading the entirety of *This Space of Writing* readers will likely have an adequately clear understanding of what Mitchelmore means by "silence" (and why it's missing from most conventional literary fiction) and why its lack of "horizon" makes literature uniquely rewarding, but I confess to finding his critical language at times somewhat impalpable or cryptic, at least according to my own admittedly more buttoned-down approach to criticism.

On the other hand, after reading this book no one could doubt Mitchelmore's commitment to a view of literature that affirms its status as art and defends it against attempts to identify it with conventional practices or subsume it to external agendas. However subjective his terms of analysis might sometimes be, he uses them as a way of taking literature seriously to a degree found in few other critics short of Harold Bloom. It is surely unlikely that before the development of the literary weblog pieces such as the ones collected in *This Space of Writing* could have found a home in traditional print publications, but that is mostly because Mitchelmore indeed regards the literary work and the role of the critic with an intensity of purpose that most literary journalism rejects in favor of "liveliness," which usually manifests itself in superficial analysis and trite observations. Mitchelmore thinks that reading is not simply a life-enhancing but a life-determining activity. This is the way literature orients us to life, through the transforming experience of reading, not in the specious attempt to "represent" reality, and Mitchelmore's inquiry into how such a thing might happen, despite the relative brevity of

some of the selections, is not content with surface details about plots and settings, and his commentary is never trite.

Although *This Space of Writing* is not conspicuously a theory-oriented book, readers will surely note the numerous references to the theoretical writings of such figures as George Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, especially the latter. These references are scattered throughout the book, and thus the critical/theoretical perspective informing Mitchelmore's analysis remains in the background. While again we learn enough about the animating assumptions of a writer like Blanchot to appreciate the extent to which Mitchelmore shares them—the name of his blog and title of this book testify to that, as they are both allusions to Blanchot's book *The Space of Literature*—this influence is perhaps the most opaque to American readers, as Blanchot is in this country one of the least known of the major 20th century French thinkers. Certainly Blanchot's ideas are most appealing to someone who, like Steve Mitchelmore, wants to deepen his engagement with literature rather than dismiss it as too subjective and turn instead to its social context, which may explain their relative neglect by American academic critics.

Michael Orthofer's *The Complete Review Guide to Contemporary World Fiction* is published by a university press (Columbia University Press), but it has a much wider audience in mind, an audience comprised of readers mostly unfamiliar with "world literature," or at least literature from the less prominent or privileged corners of the world. This, unfortunately, is a widely shared condition, among academic and non-academic readers alike. The book could be seen as the culmination of the effort Orthofer has made since founding *Complete Review/Literary Saloon* to call attention to translated books. While this guide to contemporary world fiction goes beyond translated fiction to include entries on English-language fiction as well, surely its greatest contribution to "world literature" is in surveying available translations from all regions of the world and informing readers about the writers and works that are available in English. Since English remains the world's foremost literary language—in terms of the number of readers a translated writer could acquire, not in its presumptive superiority as a medium of literary achievement--Orthofer's book potentially brings translated fiction to the largest audience a writer outside the English-using world might hope to reach.

Orthofer has always seemed encyclopedic in the scope of his interest in translated fiction, so the comprehensive treatment of contemporary world fiction in this book is no surprise. (If he hasn't literally read every single title in the book it would be understandable—but I'd be willing to wager that he has.) At the same time, his introduction duly cautions the reader to consider the less than ideal circumstances in which translated fiction is made available to American readers:

When publishers in the United States do seek out translated works, they often take their cues from elsewhere. Critical acclaim, literary prizes, and best-seller status--preferably in several different markets, rather than just the original local one--are prerequisites for most foreign fiction to be considered from the American market, especially large commercial publishers. This herd mentality is widely practiced elsewhere as well, leading to a narrow, homogeneous tier of international fiction that is widely available throughout the world and in many languages, whereas excellent works from less internationally celebrated authors can struggle to find the recognition and readers they deserve. Even though exceptional works do come into circulation in this way, too often it is the second-rate works--the earnest prize-winning novels and imitative local thrillers--that make the cut and disappoint both readers (with their mediocre quality) and publishers (with their low sales).

The Complete Review Guide to Contemporary World Fiction is in part an attempt to ameliorate this discouraging situation by highlighting the more "exceptional works" available, especially those offered by the "smaller and more nimble publishers" that have increasingly appeared.

The format of the book—It is essentially a reference book—precludes Orthofer from engaging in much literary criticism, although he does attempt succinct descriptions of the writers and works he includes, typically identifying the prominent writers in a given country, as well as their most noteworthy or representative books. Although many of the writers mentioned, particularly those from Western Europe and perhaps Latin America, will be relatively familiar to readers who monitor the most influential book review pages, many others will surely be unknown. No region of the world is left uncovered, although in some cases Orthofer must note the dearth of available translations, as in southeast Asia, where "Almost no fiction from the . . . nations extending from Burma (Myanmar) to Vietnam is accessible to English-speaking readers,

despite the strong literary traditions in several of these countries," or the South Pacific, where size and isolation made it difficult "for local literature [from the islands] to make inroads beyond their shores."

Altogether *The Complete Review Guide* seems a quite useful book for readers who would like to begin reading translated fiction, but who would also like to go beyond the names most likely to show up in the *New York Times Book Review* and aren't sure where the best source of advice about where to start might be found or how conflicting judgments might be reconciled. Orthofer's guiding hand is a sure one. He makes all the suitable distinctions and concisely provides information allowing readers to make discerning choices. In general, the book effectively transfers to book form what is most valuable about Orthofer's blog and website: their effort to be useful to serious readers of fiction. My only real reservation about the book is the inclusion of a section on U.S. fiction. While Orthofer's selection of authors and tendencies is defensible enough, still, since the book is clearly intended to steer English-language—primarily American—readers to existing works of fiction in translation, the discussion of American fiction seems at best perfunctory, at worst overly reductive, and ultimately unnecessary. This is probably true of the sections on British and Canadian fiction as well, although perhaps some more provincially-minded American readers might find them informative.

If *This Space of Writing* and *The Complete Review Guide to Contemporary World Fiction* reinforce and confirm their authors' initial ambitions as writers exploring the possibilities of blogging as a medium for writing, Scott Esposito's *The Surrender* embodies an ambition entirely separate from the author's work as a literary blogger and editor, signaling an aspiration to reach an audience broader than that attracted to purely literary discussion and criticism (like Orthofer, Esposito's interest as critic has inclined in particular to translated fiction). *The Surrender* is a memoir (albeit one that also at times veers into cultural criticism in its triptych of essays) relating Esposito's gradual acceptance and ultimate expression of his lifelong impulse to cross-dress: "On the day I at last felt hair brushing the small of my back I understood," he writes at the beginning of the book:

It was a time of great indulgence. Twelve very dauntless months in which I demolished my exasperating timidity, this endless maybe. There would be no restraint.

This nagging over wasted money and deviant needs would drop dead. Drop dead. I did as I pleased. I answered all impulses without hesitation. I did not pause for even one second. Stopping to think would only lead to that oppressive indecision. But there was absolutely no need for contemplation because my entire life I had known exactly what I must do. First a new dress. . . .

The book treats this phenomenon not as an element of sexuality per se (although it is closely tied to cultural conceptions of masculinity), and Esposito's story finally would have little to no interest to readers seeking titillation or prurient detail. It is in part a story of self-discovery and self-assertion, in part an examination of the depth of American culture's rigid opposition between male and female as marks of identity and the damage it causes. The essays inevitably provide a narrative of Esposito's odyssey—although in a fragmented, nonlinear way that makes the story itself subordinate to his meditation on and exposition of the story's broader significance. One could say that Esposito's effort to express the complexity of the story from his current perspective is finally the actual story that emerges from *The Surrender*. In a sense, writing the essays in this book parallels and reinforces in literary form the affirmation of authentic self he chronicles, a declaration to the world at large of the integrity of that assertion.

If ultimately *The Surrender* lingers in the reading memory first of all as memoir, certainly Esposito also relies on his skills and sensibility as a literary critic when drawing out the implications of his experience. The book originated as an essay first published in *The White Review*, "The Last Redoubt," (which now serves as the middle section of *The Surrender*), and while in this essay Esposito first reveals his heretofore "secret life," he does so as part of an extended and very detailed exposition of Abbas Kiarostami's film, *Close-Up*. He concludes:

At the end of the film [the protagonist] breaks out into tears. As he delivers the gift of a small tree to the family he has wronged, he begins to weep. With. . .the family massed around him he loses all control. Whoever he has become, he feels that the world now condones it, and that weight is overwhelming.

In the final essay he similarly parallels his increasing determination to assert his true nature with the particular books he was reading during the process (in the year of his "decision," the list includes, among others, Harry Mathews, Gerald Murnane, George Eliot, Karl Ove Knausgaard, as well as Wittgenstein and Derrida). However much *The Surrender* might be called

"personal writing," clearly part of the courage Esposito mustered and the insight he gained while contemplating his circumstances were derived from his intense engagement with art, literature, and critical inquiry.

Although the book is often focused specifically on Esposito's desire to wear women's clothing, finally the taboo he most fervently wants to break is the one forbidding men from cultivating feelings associated with femininity. While his own feminine inclinations seek external expression through discarding conventional male clothes and adopting emblematic female attire, what he really desires is that the culturally reinforced divide between masculinity and femininity be breached, the opposition between these categories subverted. Here the influence in particular of Derrida on Esposito's thinking can be discerned; indeed, the book might have been given additional coherence if this influence had been even more explicitly drawn out, providing a conceptual frame that helps us understand the artificiality of "masculine" and "feminine" in contrast to their persistent cultural dominance, the pernicious consequences of which Scott Esposito's experience exemplifies. On the other hand, this undoubtedly might have tilted the book more toward abstract theory and potentially lessened its appeal to general readers as a form of personal testimony.

In its way, *The Surrender* shows Scott Esposito, of the three writers considered here, diverging most sharply from the path on which he started as a literary blogger. Steve Mitchelmore continues to hew to that path most faithfully, not just in his book but in the writing he continues to do on *This Space*, while Michael Orthofer perhaps demonstrates a certain kind of continuity between what can be accomplished on blogs and what we expect from books. Certainly all three writers succeed in demonstrating that the literary blog was (is) a medium perfectly capable of supporting credible critical discourse and cultivating intelligent critics whose contributions to that discourse easily rival anything to be found in the purely print media. That they now are contributing through these books ultimately seems simply the confirmation of their already evident achievements.

Golden Days

In an interview with *Lit Hub* (for its "Secrets of the Book Critics" series), Madeleine Schwartz asserts that

Broadly speaking, the internet has been terrible for book criticism and book critics. Book reviews have been shuttered and magazines have folded. It's nearly impossible to make a living writing criticism, which in turn means that authors with books out can only sink or swim. The excitement about new online venues has been heartening, but unless the economics of reviewing changes, the profession only has about five years to live. . . .

Perhaps Ms. Schwartz is predominantly thinking of the low, or absent, payment book reviewers can expect when she claims "the internet has been terrible for book criticism and book critics," although she would then be referring mostly to the latter. However, that entirely legitimate concern does not at all justify a claim that the internet has been damaging to criticism, considering either its quality or its visibility. Literary blogs and online book review sites, as well as some online literary magazines, have over the past 15 years greatly supplemented the serious discussion of new books that previously took place solely in print newspapers and magazines. (These sites have also made possible a complementary discussion of not-so-new books that did not much exist at all in the newspapers and magazines.) They have also enhanced the coverage of translated books, which still get minimal coverage in print. There are in addition many more longer-form reviews and extended critical essays than were ever allowed to appear in other than the most resolutely "intellectual" of print magazines. Anyone who thinks the shuttering of newspaper book reviews has diminished the availability of informed criticism devoted to the purposeful consideration of books and literature just doesn't know where to look.

It is almost certainly true that "It's nearly impossible to make a living writing criticism," and equally true that some of even the best of the online book review publications don't pay their reviewers, a regrettable state of affairs. Further, it is arguably the case that the internet was terrible for writers whose primary review outlets were the newspapers and magazines that scaled back if not eliminated books and arts coverage—as well as other "frills"—because their readership in general declined in competition with online media. But the general nostalgia expressed by critics like Schwartz for the golden days when critics could make a living from writing print-based reviews and literary journalism seems to me misplaced, if not an outright fantasy. I am unaware of many general-interest book reviewers and critics—even the iconic

ones, from Edmund Wilson or Elizabeth Hardwick in a much older generation of critics to John Leonard or Helen Vendler in a more recent one—who were able to subsist on reviewing alone. Most had teaching jobs or worked in editorial or publishing positions. Perhaps some could use book reviewing to supplement income from writing books.

The sum of money paid for newspaper and periodical reviews, however, surely could not alone support a professional career in criticism. Even today, it is hard to imagine that the few hundred dollars a book review might provide could be sustained consistently enough to actually contribute a great deal to a "living" as a critic (an actual critic, and not a lifestyle journalist or ersatz book publicist). To say the least, I am pleased when I receive payment for reviews and criticism I write. But I never thought that writing literary criticism was a lucrative career move, and I don't believe that criticism will die in five years. Some things are worthwhile in and of themselves and don't require affirmation through their market exchange value.

Hierarchies of Literary Culture

In "Book Blogs as Tastemakers," an article by Beth Driscoll published in the Australian academic journal *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, the author discusses two "networks" of literary blogs, Romance fiction blogs and what she calls "highbrow literary blogs," to determine their influence "as shared expressions of readers' aesthetic conduct." One of the three highbrow blogs Driscoll examines is *The Reading Experience*.

In her Abstract, Driscoll maintains that "Analysis of book blogs shows that while new media does enable mass participation of readers in book culture, this participation can be stratified into taste-based groups, which are themselves further stratified by a hierarchy in which bloggers accumulate a specific kind of 'readerly capital' evident in their influence on other readers." *The Reading Experience*, according to this analysis, invites readers to participate in "highbrow" book culture and itself occupies the place in the literary hierarchy where highbrow tastes (difficult books, often by obscure authors) are expressed and reinforced. (The other two blogs occupying this place that Driscoll considers are Steve Mitchelmore's *This Space* and Veronica Scott Esposito's *Conversational Reading*.) "Highbrow literary blogs complicate the

distinction between amateur and professional literary criticism," Driscoll writes, "by offering long-form, highly intellectualised writing about literature."

Although Driscoll really doesn't make many value judgments about this "highly intellectualised writing," she does at one point conclude that it "complicates a straightforward view of the internet as democratising, and suggests that the hierarchies of literary culture persist and are, in some form, reproduced online." As she more or less admits, however, the room at the putative top of this particular hierarchy is exceedingly small. Driscoll identifies Esposito, Mitchelmore, and me as "influencers" in this sphere, but while I cannot speak for the other two, in my case I have to say that my "influence" on most days is, from my own perspective, all but impossible to detect.

Driscoll quotes a comment made by a reader of an interview I gave a couple of years ago (upon the publication of *Beyond the Blurb*):

I admit, I am intimidated by *The Reading Experience*. I have clicked over there, and quickly clicked away, because I don't see any footholds... all seems to be authors and books I've never heard of.

I myself admit that this comment dismays me. Although it has certainly been one of my goals to bring attention to "authors and books [you've] never heard of"—because the author or book in question has been unjustly neglected in a literary marketplace that prioritizes the already done and the already known—I am certainly disappointed to hear that some readers have found no "footholds" in my approach. If to find a foothold means to come upon the usual books discussed on the popular sites and in mainstream book reviews, then generally speaking new readers of this blog have no doubt often lost their footing. But if I have been unable to make my commentary on unfamiliar—indeed, perhaps "difficult"—works or on more "technical" issues of literary criticism accessible to general readers, I have not succeeded in one of my aims in starting the blog. I indeed hoped to "complicate the distinction between amateur and professional literary criticism"—more precisely the distinction between general-interest and academic criticism—but I also wanted to make such a hybrid practice intelligible to all good-faith readers, certainly not intimidating.

Driscoll maintains that, in *This Space* and *The Reading Experience* at least (*Conversational Reading*, she says, has a different tone, the writing "clearer, more straightforwardly structured" and thus leaning "more towards the mode of the middlebrow), the writing steadfastly "refuses to be accessible." Again speaking just for myself, this is not my intention at all. Since I believe an important function of criticism is accuracy of description, I would be subverting my own purposes if I deliberately used obfuscating language or fixated on arcane issues. In order to give an accurate description of a literary work—more specifically, of my attentive experience of the work—it is, however, sometimes necessary to focus on some qualities of a literary work in a way that goes beyond the customary sorts of judgments and generalizations that often pass for literary criticism, to use locutions that are more precise if not regularly employed in more casual discussions of books. Perhaps what Steve Mitchelmore and I have in common is that we both believe a literary work requires the reader's commitment to the work's own autonomous reality, making the critic (as first of all a reader) a kind of witness to the imaginatively authentic qualities of this invoked reality, to adequately describe which calls for some acuity of thinking and exactitude of language.

I have to agree with Driscoll that of the three of us she includes in her analysis, it is Steve Mitchelmore who has most steadfastly maintained "the autonomy of blogging as an intellectual practice." Although he began at one point to stretch out beyond his blog to other outlets (including *TLS*) for his critical writing, for a number of years now he has mainly confined himself to *This Space*, the freedom of which he values over the greater exposure he might get from also writing for other publications. There is surely something admirable in Mitchelmore's dedication to the writing over the wider recognition his forays into print publication might have brought. I myself decided to seek out opportunities as a book reviewer beyond *The Reading Experience*, not in search of external validation or prestige but to possibly reach a wider audience of readers. (The most prestigious publications have yet to come calling.) I have tried to maintain the blog along the way, but I admit it has too often been neglected in favor of these other writing projects. On balance, I've probably indeed reached more readers than if I'd attended to the blog alone more diligently—although I intend to continue writing on the blog, even if it is a different kind of writing (not as loose and informal) than would have been found here in the early days of litblogging, and at a time when most of the prominent blogs of that time have ceased to exist or have remained dormant for many years now.

If I am an "influencer" in online criticism, as Driscoll has it, it certainly isn't reflected in my blog stats, and most of the reviews and essays I have written elsewhere receive a few generous retweets but generally disappear from view rather quickly. I don't begrudge this situation, because ultimately I agree with what I take to be Mitchelmore's position, which is that the satisfaction of writing is in the writing itself and its service to literature, not in ancillary recognition. I am grateful for whatever readers I have—and most of them are themselves very intelligent people who simply have an interest in literature, not in "high culture" as a "commodity"—but I view this blog and my other writing not as an exception to the "democratising" of online literary culture but its very embodiment: a failed academic started a blog and succeeded sufficiently that a successful academic thinks he could be a "tastemaker."