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The Kids Are Reading Chaucer

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At a recent symposium of the BABEL Working Group, I remembered something that Bob Dylan says in the 1967 biopic *Don't Look Back*. The symposium aimed to rethink the boundaries between artistic creation and scholarly knowledge, to combine academic knowledge with a little rock 'n' roll. Although the two are not necessarily opposed, they clearly are in Dylan's mind. Asked if he's ever read the Bible, he says "I may have skimmed through it," and somehow he manages to keep a straight face. Too cool for school, Dylan pretends he's an illiterate fool—a posture that is necessitated, apparently, by some glitch in the matrix of the socio-cultural time-space continuum: ever since Bede's Caedmon, English poesis has been selling the myth that the poet must be a know-nothing. (Caedmon, according to Bede, could not sing like the other monks, and so he went out to sleep in the stable. Struck by divine inspiration, a dream-angel teaches him to compose verse.) Dylan's "I may have skimmed through it" is the Caedmon theory of poetics: these fables try to teach us that artistic making and scholarly knowledge have nothing to do with one another.

Of course, scholars and aesthetes know full well that knowledge and enjoyment are inseparable: clearly Dylan is familiar with the Bible. Artists do need training, and scholarship is thrilling, creative work. But one's credibility as an academic often requires self-denial of pleasure. And for Caedmon and Dylan, poetic authority comes from being stupid. As Allen Ginsberg puts it, "Businessmen are serious, Movie / producers are serious. Everybody's serious but me." The scholar ranks among the "serious": pleasure never figures into the official metrics of academic professionalism. As far as I know, no Graduate School of Arts and Sciences offers a course in Professionalization and Personal Satisfaction, and the official rhetoric rarely endorses soul-formation or titillation. Efficiency and

“academic excellence” mark the bottom line. As Christopher Newfield says in *Ivy and Industry*, “academics are neither artists nor bureaucrats but both at the same time”: we are vexed by an oppressive double-consciousness, trying to produce humanist work but measuring ourselves according to anti-humanist standards (215).^[1] Or, as Stanley Fish so graciously puts it: “Save the world on your own time.” (I say nothing about the millions of adjuncts who live in academia’s flowerpots under the light of five hundred PowerPoints.) But if art and critique are the opposed terms of our current condition, then who better to help us than the great poet and bureaucrat Geoffrey Chaucer?

Today, a vanguard of radicals and misfits is turning to Chaucer (and to the medieval generally), looking to form a rapprochement between the dream-angel of individual talent and the monastery of academic tradition. You’ve probably already heard about the BABEL Working Group: a ragtag band of merry pranksters and philologists, BABEL is an interstellar *Raft of the Medusa*, patched together from the ruins of the postmodern university, a make-shift escape-pod sending out distress signals (and mating calls) to other Gonzo medievalists. This September, BABEL came together at the CUNY Graduate Center for the second in a pair of symposia on the “Critical/Liberal/Arts,” organized by J. Allan Mitchell, Julie Orlemanski, and Myra Seaman, with help on the ground in New York City from the GC’s Steven Kruger and Glenn Burger. (For the organizers’ manifesto, see [http://babelsymposia2013.org/.](http://babelsymposia2013.org/))

Participants experimented with new forms of artful and critical expression, making art critically, doing critique artistically, and practicing all manner of liberality, with the largesse and romanticism of an Arthurian knight.

- Ammiel Alcalay, initiator of the Lost and Found Project and beloved hero of poets/medievalists everywhere, spoke about the need to bridge creative writing with a “little history.” About transgressing disciplinary boundaries, Alcalay said: “Sometimes you start out having an affair, and pretty soon you want to move in together.”
- Mashing up video and remixing critical theory, Jamie Bianco did to the stale genre of the conference talk what Hurricane Sandy did to Brooklyn, and then calmly receded. She tenderly told us about the need to save our garbage.
- Eleanor Johnson descended like Boethius’s Lady Philosophy. She read some of her new poems about toads, and she suggested that scholars might engage in “parallel play”—that is, we should try to write like the texts we study. (Your assignment, dear reader, is to write a Boethian prosimetrum for your next article.)
- Bruce Holsinger, doing some parallel play of his own, read from his *A Burnable Book*. As if Raymond Chandler had written the *Domesday Book*, Holsinger’s novel, starring Gower and Chaucer, explores the relationship between bureaucracy and art, poetry and regicide.
- Henry S. Turner reminded us that the “corporation” has existed since at least the medieval period. Looking into this history, Turner wagers, might be our best shot at staying alive as humanists while the university becomes more and more corporatized. Turner’s current research involves incorporating people into his Society for the Arts of Corporation.
- Grooving to the beat of this year’s hit single, the Digital Humanities, Michael Witmore gave the

data mine a new spin: he pointed out that the digital is “fuzzy”—there’s space for us to play within new computerizing methodologies.

- Marina Zurkow and Una Chaudhurl helped everyone make friends with global climate change, using a pedagogical approach inspired by the Buddhist profession of compassion. Technologies like compassion, meditation, and the koan offer a new way to connect the intellectual and the spiritual.
- The Hollow Earth Society, in a hilarious, para-academic performance piece that remixed the discourses of university administration and satirized post-structuralist science, proved that slime mold has colonized the university. If you don’t believe it, you might already be a slime mold.
- I wondered aloud if *Sir Orfeo* is a secret model for the critical/liberal/arts. It is: the Middle English Orfeo, unlike his Classical counterpart Orpheus, retrieves his beloved from hell in a way that validates a romantic poetics of historiography.

Proceedings will be printed in a special issue of *postmedieval* in 2015. By that time, we’ll have already translated the entire corpus of Verso books into rhymed couplets, and sneaked the poems of the Alliterative Revival behind the lines of all NSA firewalls. The future of the critical/liberal/arts is coming, and it’s going to get medieval.

[1] The academic profession, for Newfield, is a mash-up of craft-labor ideals and corporate management. Influenced by corporate models of administration during the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century, the university “yoked personal relations to explicit, impersonal procedures, procedures which treated individual exceptions as anomalous. Official authority arose from the office rather than from the person. This person, in theory, functioned through his or her specialized expertise. He or she held personal power to the degree to which expertise fit with the larger structure” (78). Our knowledge, through corporate management, becomes disembodied and impersonal—data for the administrative accounting office. This causes a kind of “double-consciousness” that prevents academics, and the middle class that they train, from realizing political agency (215). One could argue that C. Stephen Jaeger says something similar about pre-modern education in his enviable *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950-1200*. Jaeger shows how the medieval university is born out of a conflict between the body and the text.↩

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