A Long Parenthesis Begins
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> A scene previously abandoned reappears, suddenly and with as little transition as if it had never been left, as though the long interruption were only a glance which someone (who?) has cast from it into the depths of time.
>
> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*[1]

> But this is also an invitation, I want to believe, following Muñoz's thought, to stand somewhere else together—somewhere that is neither your time, nor my own, but another time outside of this one altogether (call it the ideal University). This might be a place of joy and pleasure in which we refuse the current relational and disciplinary regimes that insist we pose our desires against each other and instead experience together what it means to leave ourselves behind in favor of a new relationality -- a new touching, a new communication, a new encounter….
>
> Eileen Joy, "This is not my (or our) time"[2]

Auerbach and Joy—the two writers of these epigraphs—offer us an alternative understanding of history—one very much at odds with a conceptualization of (literary) history as an empirical regime and a disciplinary practice that exist independent of the person who practices it. If this is "unhistoricist" or "presentist," to use two terms adopted recently by early modernists (the first imposed disparagingly; the second embraced defiantly), then it is only because our understanding of history has become impoverished, and the restrictions we place on ourselves overwhelming.[3] Some time ago, when I was a graduate student still doing classwork, I remember speaking to a dissertator, who confessed that she had really wanted to write her dissertation on Dickens and Katherine Mansfield, but had come to realize that the only thing they had in common was her attachment to them. At the time, I remember thinking that that should be enough, although I also remember thinking that it should be enough because she should be ingenious enough to come up with another (legitimate) reason to justify the selection. Ironically, she and I were speaking within the very gates where Auerbach had spent the last years of his professional life, the critic who promoted a methodology (if it can be called that) in which texts are chosen at "random" based on the vitality they hold for the critic. In contrast to his practice of choosing texts that spoke to him, we had learned to choose them (or to pretend to choose them) based on some "external" justification, whether understood in terms of literary period, movement, or methodology. What the field loses when we discipline ourselves in this way is profound: not only the insight that the individual brings to a text when she or he approaches it for more idiosyncratic reasons (interest, curiosity, love), but also the possibility of developing a new relationality to each other, one based on our mutual passions and pleasures rather than our expertise.

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[1] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1st Paperback Edition, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 534.

[2] Eileen Joy, "This is Not My (or, Our) Time, so Please Take Ecstasy With Me: The Necessity of Generous Reading," *In the Middle* (group blog), 6 January 2014, http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2013/12/this-is-not-my-or-our-time-so-please.html.

[3] For the term of "unhistoricist," see Valerie Traub, "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies" *PMLA* 128.1 (January 2013): 21-39. See also Carla Freccero, Madhavi Menon, and Valerie Traub, in Forum: "Historicism and Unhistoricism in Queer Studies," *PMLA* 128.3 (May 2013): 782–84. For presentism, see for starters, Hugh Grady and Terrence Hawkes, "Presenting Presentism," introduction to Grady and Hawkes, eds. (London: Routledge, 2007), 1-5; Ewan Fernie, "Shakespeare and the Prospect of Presentism," *Shakespeare Survey* 58 (2005): 169-84.

This vitality, or preference, is what we learn to marginalize, to place first in the parenthesis, and then subsequently erase to foreground the more important and serious things. What, the reader might well ask, does any of this have to do with the topic at hand: medievalism and the marginal? Part of me wants to answer that medievalism is itself in some ways the perfect "field" for the marginal, precisely because it has, and to a certain extent continues to have, a marginal location in the academy. The very meaning of the word is uncertain, or amphibolous, in that it refers both to the medieval itself (whatever that is) and the postmedieval recreation of the medieval.[4] Only part of me wants to answer in this way because I also understand that there is nothing essentially marginal about medievalism, any more than there is about any other period, whether it be the postmedieval, the early modern, or some other period. To ensure that medievalism continues to embrace the marginal, there must be a concerted effort, as I think there has been, to be inclusive of the amateur devotee of the medieval as well as inclusive of the academic's more idiosyncratic interests and desires. More importantly, at least for me, the academic participants should be encouraged to follow their own preferences, their own desires and insights, rather than to assert their expertise.

There is much to be recommended about the practices of the International Society for the Study of Medievalism, as offering us an example of just such a new relationality, both between academics and the nonacademic and between academics themselves. The Society has not restricted itself to a single definition of medievalism, and has, both by its calls for papers and by its acceptance and inclusion, encouraged academics to explore medievalism in such disparate phenomenon as the "Celtic" tattoo, medieval gaming, and the early modern. Such an expansiveness that resists firm boundaries, and thus resists any efforts to develop a concrete field of specialty over which the academic can preside as expert is evident to the continued commitment of its members to electronic media that can provide (for those who can afford it) open access to its collective work, including its journal, *Year's Work in Medievalism*, and its community-authored blog, "Medievally Speaking." One need only consider the subtitle of this blog—"An Open Access Review Journal Encouraging Critical Engagement with the *Continuing Process* of Inventing the Middle Ages" (emphasis mine)—to see that the members insist on an openness, in which they critically engage—but not adjudicate—the "continuing process of inventing the Middle Ages." One need only add here that that this question of the marginal in medievalism, a question taken up by the editor of the journal, represents a continued commitment to expanding our understanding of what is included in this continuing process of medievalism.

Right now, I am most interested in the extent to which medievalism as a practice helps us create alternative forms of history, where history, rather than being something external to the individual is something they create. Thus, if we are creating our history, then why create a mechanical one, which moves from one moment to a next and insists that these moments (and those who inhabit them) are over and done with. Both Joy and Auerbach look to a "generous" reading, one in which passion is pursued and when it is, there is some connection made, however fleeting. Eileen Joy offers the idea of "generous reading," which she offers in her own generous reading of queer theorists, José Esteban Muňoz and Leo Bersani. Here, too, she offers multiple times, not only the "my time" of a Muňoz, the "my time" of a Joy, but also "another time outside of this one altogether." This time, elsewhere called "our time," happens when the reader "touches" another, something that is done when she generously reads another. That the Munoz that she touches here is now tragically deceased, on 4 December 2013, she records, makes this brief touch all the more compelling. The

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[4] Richard Utz, "Coming to Terms with Medievalism: Toward a Conceptual History," *European Journal of English Studies* 15.2 (2011): 101-13 (106).

new relationality is something that does, indeed, exist outside of our sense of the real, and the confines of the physical body since she can touch him, in part, by reading his words.

Let's continue with Auerbach, precisely because he self-consciously creates a form of history that is a medievalism—a contemporary recreation of the medieval practice of figurative reading. If he is dogmatic about anything, it is the need to resist believing that anything, especially history, exists apart from the human beings who create it.[5] Suspicious of the "reader's will to interpretative synthesis" as well as contemporary (scientific, including scientifically informed approaches to philology) claims that historical epochs had a "practical self-sufficiency" that "resides in accomplished fact,"[6] Auerbach sees figurative thinking as that which requires from a "creative poetic faith." The epigraph of this essay gives some set of what is perceived and created—a glance from the "depths of time" to the reader. As he writes, something "reappears, suddenly and with as little transition as if it had never been left, as though the long interruption were only a glance which someone (who?) has cast from it into the depths of time." This concept of the "depths of time," glancing at the present-day individual, is a concept that insists that history comes into being only from those who create it. In this, a community is created, albeit a fleeting and provisional one, that has the potential to unite individuals through their acts of interpretation. It also, however, happens only when one is sensitive to, and purposefully responsive to, the readings of others. Auerbach, notably, closes *Mimesis* with a hope that just such an ethical community can be created from readers who approach texts with this "creative poetic faith." In one of his few statements acknowledging the period in which he wrote *Mimesis*—that is, 1944, as an exile from Germany in the strange land of Turkey, he closes, "I hope this study will reach its readers – both my friends of former years, if they are still alive, as well as all the others for whom it was intended. And may it contribute to bringing together again those whose love for our western history has serenely preserved."[7] The new relationality imagined here may not seem so expressly queer, but it is marginal. He may seem less passionate, and more serene than the queer, and yet behind what is written is a need and desire to have a responsive history, in which readers can find what they need, if they can just trust in their own idiosyncratic desires.

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[5] Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 9 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11-76 (esp. 58).

[6] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 549; Auerbach, "Figura," 58.

[7] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 557.