

---

Short Essay

# Like two autistic moonbeams entering the window of my asylum: Chaucer's *Griselda* and Lars von Trier's *Bess McNeill*\*

\*The title of my paper is drawn from the prefatory note to Graham Harman's essay 'On Vicarious Causation,' where he writes that, while the 'strangeness' of his theory of vicarious causation 'may lead to puzzlement more than resistance,' it 'is not some autistic moonbeam entering the window of an asylum' (Harman, 2007, 187). Conversely, or perversely, this essay seeks to trace just such an autistic trajectory.

**Eileen A. Joy**

Department of English, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Illinois.

**Abstract** This essay wonders what happens when two texts and one reader happen to each other and open up a singular adventure that is also a moment of 'futurition' that opens up new horizons of meaning, both human and inhuman. How can we reckon the weird realism of fictional figures which possess something like the vibrant 'thing-power' – a sort of quasi-force to persist in existing – that Jane Bennett argues 'refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge'?

*postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* (2011) 2, 316–328.  
doi:10.1057/pmed.2011.20

---

*For Michel Foucault, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Michael E. Moore, fellow travelers in the archives.*

For the things said in these texts are so compressed that one isn't sure whether the intensity that sparks through them is due more to the vividness of the words or to the jostling violence of the facts they tell. ... The dream would have been to restore their intensity in an analysis.

Michel Foucault, 'Lives of Infamous Men'



## At the Tables of the Buried Cafés

Michael Moore believes that the dead, by an obscure mechanism of conveyance, are somehow still alive, and while we work at our desks they are standing behind us and maybe even wringing their hands a little. As he explains, ‘The dead have a claim on us with their long-forgotten passions and foibles, and their unwonted delicate breath continues to stir the hair on our necks’ (Moore, 2007, 199). Of Czeslaw Milosz’s poetry, Moore writes that, ‘The painful sense of the tangible reality of the dead, the *being* of someone who has been hurt and forgotten, is something that often attracted Milosz’s attention and worry’ (Moore, 2007, 200). So, for example, in the lines of his poem ‘Many-Tiered Man,’ Milosz wrote, ‘He asks forgiveness/from the spirits of the absent ones/ who twitter far below/at the tables of buried cafés’ (Milosz, 2004, 34).

The ‘sense’ of the ‘tangible reality of the dead’ – painful and otherwise – has long served as a meaningful lure to the study of the past, while it has also operated as a site of anxiety regarding how to properly register the distant radio signals of what Foucault once memorably called the *physical* ‘intensities’ of past ‘lives’ enclosed in the archives (Foucault, 2000, 158–159). I am tempted to call this anxiety of interpretation a *spiritual* anxiety, following the lead of Carolyn Dinshaw, who writes,

when I read Margery Kempe’s *Book*, I encounter her words in a hermeneutical Now in which medieval past meets twenty-first-century present. The peculiar temporality of interpretation – the time of hermeneutic contact – is out of linear time. In view of such inevitable hermeneutic conditions, medieval studies is not – and we must not pretend that it is – so entirely different from the spiritual phenomena it discusses. (Dinshaw, 2007a, 236)

And medieval studies might also be spiritual because, as Moore has written, it entails a certain sympathy with Milosz’s belief in the realm of literature as ‘a refuge that is strange and complex, somewhat embarrassing, and yet a valuable source of spiritual interiority for those who suffer in the midst of history’ (Moore, 2007, 208).

But if literature is an important source of ‘spiritual interiority,’ what sort of ‘interiority’ (or trans-sentience) is this, exactly, that is *emplaced* as an object on the *outside* of the reader who accesses or cognitively triggers or enacts or *feels* this realm? We might tentatively qualify this ‘interiority’ (which is never wholly on the *inside* of anything or anyone) as a ‘quasi-object’ that is neither entirely an object nor either fully a subject but is nevertheless *in the world* as a ‘constructor of intersubjectivity,’ whereby the ‘we’ of any given moment is made in the ‘bursts and occultation’s of the “I”’ (Serres, 1982, 227) as texts are shuttled back and forth, over vast stretches of time, between shelves and tables and

readers and other texts which may be, in Michel Serres's terms, only 'stations and relays.' Who can tell when a text, or a reader, is an 'it' and when it is an 'I' (or a 'we')? As Serres writes, we don't know whether quasi-objects, which are also quasi-subjects, 'are beings or relations, tatters of being or ends of relations. By them, the principle of individuation can be transmitted or can get stuck' (Serres, 1982, 227–228).

The question is formulated in a different way by Dinshaw in the process of formulating a 'queer history' that would reckon 'in the most expansive way possible with how people exist in time, with what it feels like to be a body in time, or in multiple times, or out of time' (Dinshaw, 2007b, 109). This comment prefaces an account by Dinshaw of the '*bodily* absorption in the past' experienced by Hope Emily Allen, the first editor of Margery Kempe's *Book*, who often spoke of the medieval Margery as if she were an intimate companion living alongside her in the twentieth century. This calls to mind as well, for Dinshaw, a singular moment in Foucault's essay 'Lives of Infamous Men,' intended to serve as a preface to a never-completed anthology of the 'flash existences' of incarcerated men revealed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prison documents, royal petitions, and 'lettres de cachet.' As Foucault sat reviewing these documents in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale, he 'experienced the terrifying, austere, lyrical beauty' of these documents 'consigning atheistic monks, obscure usurers, and other wretches to confinement' (Dinshaw, 2007b, 112). As Foucault himself wrote, 'It would be hard to say exactly what I felt when I read these fragments ... . No doubt, one of these impressions that are called "physical," as if there could be any other kind' (Foucault, 2000, 158). More crucially, as Dinshaw relates, Foucault worried that the 'intensities' he first experienced in the archive wouldn't 'enter in the orders of reason at all, since my discourse was incapable of conveying ... in the necessary way' the 'excesses, the blend of dark stubbornness and rascality, of these lives whose disarray and relentless energy one senses beneath the stone-smooth words' (Foucault, 2000, 158–159, 158).

What will allow us, Dinshaw asks, with Foucault, 'to analyse these feelings, these experiences' (Dinshaw, 2007b, 112)? What, indeed. Foucault's provisional answer, never fully realized, was to present the documents he culled in the archive in an anthology that might preserve their unadorned *effects* of 'beauty mixed with dread' (Foucault, 2000, 159). For Foucault, it was important that these texts revealed glimpses of men who really *lived* and that these documents 'really crossed lives; existences were actually risked and lost in these words' (Foucault, 2000, 160). And yet, paradoxically, '[h]aving been nothing in history, having played no appreciable role in events or among important people, having left no identifiable trace around them, they don't have and never will have any existence outside the precarious domicile of these words' (Foucault, 2000, 162). I venture here that Foucault's project to gather together these 'lives' was a deeply humanist one, not so far removed from Moore's 'Miloszan humanism,'



in which the ‘ephemeral nature of past reality, and of human traces, is a burden that historical scholarship must strive to carry, even if it is clumsy, and less capable than poetry ... of capturing their reality in the fine nets of language’ (Moore, 2007, 202). Or as Foucault himself put it: ‘Singular lives, transformed into strange poems through who knows what twists of fate – that is what I decided to gather into a kind of herbarium’ (Foucault, 2000, 157).

It will be the aim of this essay to suggest how we might begin to trace, through a certain *speculative* reason (or autistic unreason), some of the strange ‘intensities,’ and even the ‘weird’ *realism*,<sup>1</sup> of two *fictional* figures – Griselda of Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* and Bess McNeill of Lars von Trier’s film *Breaking the Waves* (1996) – who have taken up their residence in the ‘precarious domicile of words’ (and celluloid) and who also, through a ‘vicarious causation’ enabled by reading, might make sensual contact with each other (and with readers) across time. I want to propose a form of post/human literary criticism that might take seriously Michael Witmore’s claim, in his essay, ‘We Have Never Not Been Inhuman,’ that ‘there is something *other* about linguistic artifacts of human culture’ (my emphasis) and further, our ‘work with narratives puts us in touch with forms of reduction or compression that are every bit as diagrammatic and so (potentially) inhuman as those who study the compression algorithms of physics or planetary biology’ (Witmore, 2010, 213).

This will *not* be to turn away from Moore’s, Dinshaw’s, and also Foucault’s deeply *humanist* projects to capture something of the *intensity* of the ‘brief lives, encountered by chance in books and documents’ (Foucault, 2000, 157), nor to disavow the experience of what Dinshaw has called, with Foucault, the ‘vibrations’ of the queer *corporeality* of a *shared* contemporaneity with real persons from the past (Dinshaw, 2007b, 110–112), and what Moore has described as the *presence* felt ‘by historians at their reading desks’ – the ‘upwelling of people out of the past’ (Moore, 2007, 200). Rather, my aim is to thicken, by an in- or post/human route, these projects’ (perhaps not entirely conscious) interest in a textual (and not altogether *human*) ‘eventuality’ [*événemential*] – a *coming-into-being* that, following the thought of French philosopher Claude Romano, ‘introduces a fissure between the past and the future, from which time itself wells up in the diachrony of its radically burst open and non-synchronisable times’ (Romano, 2009, 46). With reference to the ‘vibrations’ felt at the scholar’s desk, this ‘eventuality’ requires an *advenant* (the one to whom the ontic ‘event’ comes, or is *assigned* – in this case, a reader, a person, a *hermeneut*) who is ‘constitutively open to events’ and whose ‘intrinsic possibilities’ are reconfigured by these events (Romano, 2009, 20). For Romano, an *advenant* can also be nonhuman: ‘the lightning happens *just as much* to the sky that it lights up as it does to the walker who observes it’ (Romano, 2009, 29).

More specifically, this essay wonders what happens when two texts and one reader *happen* to each other and *open up* a singular adventure (‘adventure

1 By ‘speculative’ reason and also ‘weird’ realism, I mean to invoke the recent work of Graham Harman and other ‘speculative realists’ and ‘object-oriented’ theorists who have been working on non-human-centered and post-‘discursive turn’ and ‘carnal’ materialisms, metaphysics, phenomenologies, and ontologies (where the world is no longer merely the carrier of human signification), and who also hold, following Harman, that ‘[i]ndividual entities of various different scales (not just tiny quarks and electrons) are the ultimate stuff of the cosmos,’ and further, ‘[t]hese entities are never exhausted by any of their relations or even by their sum of all possible relations’ (Harman, 2010a). This group of

thinkers is in no way unified in their thinking, but for an excellent introduction to and overview of the history and development of the recent critical turns to ‘speculative realism’ and ‘object-oriented ontology,’ see Harman (2010b). For important individual inflections of speculative and object-oriented philosophies, see Bennett (2010), Bryant (2011), Harman (2005, 2009, 2011), Morton (2010), and Shaviro (2011).

2 See Latour (2004), 245–248.

3 For Bennett, considering the ‘vibrant’ power of things is to ultimately ‘think’ objects outside of their traditional roles ‘as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert’ and to invent (dream?) for objects a lively ontology of ‘vital materiality’ in which things ‘act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’ outside of human will and human designs

without return’) that is also a moment of ‘futurition,’ opening up new horizons of meaning (Romano, 2009, 51, 124–125), both human and inhuman. Could this (hopefully) lead to a mode of criticism, following Bruno Latour, that is drawn toward the ‘multiplication’ of the ‘fragile’ construction of the *thing itself* (the text) as a ‘matter of [mutual] concern,’ which is also a ‘gathering’ – both of other texts, but also human and inhuman ‘bodies’?<sup>2</sup> How can we reckon the weird *realism* of fictional figures who never were and never can be human, and which possess something like the vibrant ‘thing-power’ – a sort of quasi-force to *persist in existing* – that Jane Bennett argues ‘refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge’ (Bennett, 2010, 3)?<sup>3</sup>

### Shafts or Freight Tunnels

China Mieville’s novel *The City & The City* is set in two Balkan-type cities – Beszel and Ul Qoma – that are supposedly separate from each other, with different languages, habits, customs, architectural styles, and governmental regimes, and with heavily policed borders and checkpoints between them, yet they inhabit the same geographical space. The citizens of each place can glimpse each other’s dim shapes, but they have also been trained from childhood to ‘unsee’ each other. The two cities function as ‘topolgängers’ to each other and each possesses areas of ‘totality-alterity,’ where they are completely unbreachable by the other, but there are also ‘crosshatched’ spaces – which might be a park or a neighborhood block or a street or even one room in a building – that are completely permeable. Nevertheless, it is illegal to cross from one to the other or to ‘see’ persons from the other city who might be clearly standing right beside you. The two cities have long, ancient histories and it is surmised, alternately, that they were simultaneously built on the same ‘Romanesque’ ruins of an even older city, or that they were once *one* ancient city that, at some point in time, underwent a ‘cleavage.’ Similar to some of the varieties of parallel universes, or ‘quilted multiverses,’ described by physicist Brian Greene, Beszel and Il Qoma might be ‘hovering [in space] millimeters away’ from each other, or they may have merged completely (‘grosstopically,’ Mieville’s narrator, Taydor Borlú, would say), or more strangely, ‘the very notion of their location’ might prove ‘parochial, devoid of meaning’ (Greene, 2011, 5, 35).

Although situated in very different cultural and historical milieus, I see Chaucer’s *Griselda* and von Trier’s *Bess McNeill* as ‘topolgängers’ who share a quilted multiverse of literary self-objects who figure the compressed and diagrammatic arcs of certain impossible (saintly) virtues as well as of the monstrous (perverse) enjoyment occasioned by subjecting oneself to that impossibility. At the same time, their stories contain moments of the mechanical failure of those ‘virtues’ and enjoyment (both structural and figural), as a result of which, ‘crosshatches’ are formed where they are able to ‘breach’ and make



contact with each other. Their two stories share so many structural and narrative details, that it is not difficult to make the case that they both arise out of a very old and familiar (and folkloric)<sup>4</sup> story having to do with love, testing, obedience, self-control, and ultimately, the gift of one's death as the foundation of a certain ethics that demands everything, regardless of the cost. That this 'gift' is typically 'offered' (and perhaps also 'enjoyed') by women (and queers) has been well documented.<sup>5</sup>

As has been much explained, von Trier's film *Breaking the Waves* is part of a trilogy of films (including *The Idiots* and *Dancer in the Dark*) in which von Trier sought to pay homage to the role of the female martyr 'in its most extreme form' and to women who 'take the ideal all the way' (see Björkman, 1996; Smith, 2000, 25). The three films are often referred to as the 'Gold-Heart' trilogy because they are partly based on a 'lost' Danish fairy-tale book (*Guld Hjerte*) from von Trier's childhood about a little girl of the same name who embarks on a journey through the woods with pieces of bread and other things in her pockets. Along the way, she gives away everything she has, including her clothing, and whenever the animals of the forest question her risky behavior and impending destitution, at every bleak turn of the narrative, including one moment when she stands naked at the edge of the woods, she proclaims, 'I'll be fine, anyway,' or, in another translation, 'But at least I'm okay' (see Björkman, 1996, 2003, 164).

von Trier has shared that, other than this fairy tale, the primary sources for *Breaking the Waves* were Sade's *Justine* (1791) and Carl Dreyer's film *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), and Emily Watson, who plays Bess McNeill, studied Renee Falconetti's Jeanne D'Arc for her numerous close-ups in von Trier's film (Badley, 2010, 73, 74–75). It is important to note here the child-like nature of Bess's character: she is referred to as 'stupid' and 'not right in the head' on more than one occasion, even by herself, and Watson clearly employed the child-like affects of open wonder, innocent naiveté, eager curiosity, unbridled joy, and belligerent willfulness in many of her scenes. Bess also conducts secret conversations with God, much as a child might, in which she both beseeches and argues with 'Him' over various 'favours.' In the initial sex scene between Bess and her older husband Jann (played by Stellan Skarsgård) on their wedding day, these childlike affects are particularly discomfiting as we feel we are witnessing a scene of sanctioned pederasty in which the 'child' is fully enjoying herself. The scene is almost impossible to watch and sets up everything that will happen afterwards, when Jann becomes paralyzed from the neck down after an accident on the oil rig on which he works, and he asks Bess to make love with other men and then tell him about her encounters in order to keep him alive. God repeats the injunction, telling Bess, 'Prove to me that you love him, and then I'll let him live.'

Believing that Jann will get better if she 'makes love' with other men, Bess embarks upon a compulsive and self-destructive journey of illicit (yet sanctified)

(Bennett, 2010, vii, viii).

- 4 The folkloric roots of Griselda's story have been extensively traced; see Cate (1932), Griffith (1931), and Severs (1942), 229–248.
- 5 On the important relations between a certain symbolic economy of 'courtly love,' the phallogocentric Law, sadism, subjection, masochism, self-sacrifice, *jouissance*, and the 'gift' of death (often of women and queers), see Cohen (1999), Fradenburg (2002), and Gaunt (2006).

anonymous and not-so-anonymous sexual encounters in the small, austere Calvinist village in which she lives in order to ‘satisfy’ both Jann’s and God’s commands, but also because she really believes in her encounters that she is making love with Jann and also saving him from dying. For Bess, this is a ‘spiritual’ endeavor, and when asked by Jann’s doctor why she is engaging in this dangerous behavior, Bess replies, ‘Jann and me, we have a spiritual contact. God gives everyone something to be good at. I’ve always been stupid, but I’m good at this,’ by which she means: believing, even when that ‘belief’ leads to her own death after being savagely beaten while prostituting herself on a ship that the other town’s prostitutes refuse to go to for good reasons. To the church elders who ex-communicate her, she insists, ‘You cannot love words. ... You can love another human being. That’s perfection.’

In the structural intersections of the fairy tale, Sadean narrative (with its interest in ‘moral’ pornography), and hagiography (Joan of Arc), we see the (un)holy alliance of childlike innocence and persistence, poverty (Bess works as a janitor in the church), sadomasochism, belief, abjection, self-sacrifice, and supposedly ‘saintly’ virtues (purity, goodness, self-abjection, blind faith) that are also found in Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*, where the ‘yonge mayden’ Griselda, ‘raised in poverty’ (l. 213),<sup>6</sup> agrees to unconditionally obey her husband Walter’s commands, against which he insists she shall neither ‘grouch nor strive’ (l. 170), whether it makes her ‘laugh or hurt’ (l. 353). Whether it makes her ‘laugh’ turns out to be an obscene joke (if even an unconscious one) since what Griselda ultimately acquiesces to ‘without complaint’ is her own two infant children’s murders, and eventually, to Walter throwing her over for a younger wife and also asking her to prepare his (and what used to be, *their*) house for the new wife’s arrival (ll. 953–966). Whether viewed as a story about wifely patience and obedience (although the Clerk and perhaps Chaucer himself caution against this reading, ll. 1142–1144, 1177–1212), or about the more general virtue of being ‘constant in adversitee’ or living in ‘vertuous suffraunce’ (ll. 1146, 1162), critical commentary on the poem has long been vexed over the tale’s seemingly inhuman moral economy and all of the ways in which its themes of sadism, masochism, inhuman suffering, self-negation, violence, and death are ineluctably enmeshed with what it supposedly means to love, and more importantly, to be ‘good,’ or in Chaucer’s terms, to be ‘kynde’ (l. 1187).<sup>7</sup> Or as Mark Miller puts it, ‘According to the Clerk’s moral argument ... there is something genuinely fearful, even terrible, about what love requires of us’ (Miller, 2004, 238).

Especially difficult to absorb is not only Griselda’s mainly stoic willingness to take whatever Walter can dish out, without ‘grouch,’ but also to seemingly up the ante of the game when, at his very first proposal of the terms of their marriage, she says she will not disobey him in either her ‘works’ or her ‘thoughts,’ even if it means her own death (ll. 362–364). And later, after Walter has already commanded that she acquiesce in the murder of her own infant daughter (albeit, he doesn’t really have their daughter killed, but Griselda thinks

6 All citations of Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* are from Benson’s edition (1987), by line number. All translations are mine.

7 For overviews (up to 1994) of critical commentary on *The Clerk’s Tales* and its interpretive difficulties, see Bronfman (1994) and Morse (1990).



he has done just that) and then several years later asks her to agree that their infant son should also be killed, Griselda proposes the unthinkable: that if she could know Walter's intentions in advance, she would acquiesce to them, no matter how horrible, and further, that if it gave him 'pleasure,' she would 'die' for him (ll. 659–665). In point of fact, in both cases, Walter did not ask her to go that far. As Allan Mitchell has written, Chaucer's tale is ultimately a 'perverse *exemplum terribile*' in which we learn that ethics 'invariably involves secrecy and sacrifice – a gift of death' and that what is 'most irrecoverable about responsibility' is 'its irresponsibility' (Mitchell, 2005, 25, 23, 24 n44). Being 'ethical,' it turns out, entails 'monstrous' choices, difficult sacrifices, and death, and I would add, an abject solitude. From Mitchell's perspective, however, this does not mean that one abandons ethics, but rather, that we recognize better the terrifying choices it often demands, as well as the ways in which Chaucer's tale beautifully demonstrates the 'instability' and 'irresolution' that may be 'the general condition of [all] moral deliberation' (Mitchell, 2005, 4).

von Trier's film likewise has entailed much discomfort among critics, especially those who find it impossible to appropriate or recuperate from a feminist perspective since the 'goodness' of the heroine requires her sexual degradation, mutilation, and murder (see Badley, 2010, 75–78, 82–83).<sup>8</sup> Having thrown herself into the sexual adventure her husband requests from her, Bess finds herself cast out by the elders of her church, her own mother locks her out of the house, and the town's children stone her while the village priest looks on. Only a sister-in-law, Dodo, and one of Jann's doctors at the hospital, Dr. Richardson, take an interest in her welfare, but neither can stop her self-destructive trajectory. 'I'm sorry I could not be good' are Bess's last words to her mother and at the inquest after her death, Dr. Richardson describes Bess as having been an 'immature, unstable person' who gave in to an 'exaggerated, perverse form of sexuality.' When asked if he has any emendations he might want to make in his report, the doctor visibly falters, and says that, instead of labeling her 'neurotic' or 'psychotic,' his diagnosis would be that she was 'good.' The response of the coroner, 'You wish the records to state that ... the deceased was suffering from being "good"? That this is the psychological defect that led to her death?' would seem to indicate that, similar to *The Clerk's Tale*, goodness is deadly.

Both Chaucer's narrative and von Trier's film highlight the monstrousness or impossibility or deadliness of goodness, while also sanctifying and praising their somewhat terrifying heroines, who are both also given perversely 'happy' endings: in Griselda's case, although she has spent over a decade thinking that both of her children have been murdered by her husband's servants, and after her husband has thrown her over for another, younger 'mayde,' nevertheless she is reunited with her children at the supposed 'wedding' banquet for Walter's second marriage where, in effect, Walter says 'surprise! just kidding!' (or, more literally, 'This is enough, my Griselda,' since 'I now know, dear wife, your

8 It should be pointed out that, since von Trier deliberately sets up his heroine as both a fierce believer in God but also, eventually, a heretic in the eyes of the elders of her severely strict church (who consign her to Hell after she dies) and then 'translates' her into a sort of saint who performs miracles (Jann's sudden recovery and also the pealing of bells over Jann's ship at the end of the movie), perhaps von Trier sought to locate his portrait of female sanctity outside the symbolic realm of the patriarchal

Word and Law (see Žižek, 1999). Nevertheless, the film never entirely escapes a certain traditional theology in which love, figured as the passive and feminized sacrifice of one's own or someone else's life, lies at the heart of Christian belief.

9 For examples of these types of readings, respectively, see Žižek (1999), Yager (2009), and Miller (2004).

steadfastness'; ll. 1051, 1056), at which point Griselda swoons and falls down, as if in a trance, grasping her children and covering them with her tears (ll. 1079–1106), after which she is re-dressed in gold garments and a jeweled crown and lives in 'concord' for many years with Walter (ll. 1114–1129). In Bess's case, her 'sacrifice' produces the result she has been wanting all along: Jann's full recovery. And just to make sure that his viewers understand that this is, indeed, a miracle, as mentioned before, the sound of church-like bells peals from the clouds above Jann's ship after he and his comrades have consigned Bess in her coffin to the northern seas. There are ways one can rescue, or repair, or perhaps simply make more explicit such perversely 'happy' endings (which are 'scandals' for many), and critics have tried, but they typically do so by positing a certain 'totality-alterity' to the supposed abyssal self-enclosures of both Griselda and Bess and then arguing for the radical forms of feminine sublimity or the Real or Levinasian holiness or love's extreme unconditionality (or pathology?) as exemplified in those self-enclosures, in ways that might productively 'trouble' our commonly held assumptions about (or stakes in) the feminine, religion, sacrifice, faith, love, goodness, violence, the law, and the symbolic order (and any combination thereof).<sup>9</sup> Or else they decide Chaucer must have either fucked up (the material got away from him, he couldn't 'handle' it, etc.), or he purposefully fucked it up to fuck us up.

What I am hoping for is a way of approaching these texts that allows them spaces of 'cross-hatch,' where we can see that, although these two figures (Bess and Griselda) have certainly been drawn (composed) in a manner that makes them *available* for such readings (whereby they become beautiful black boxes of difficult alterity and radical sublimity that are nevertheless all too familiar – i.e., too *human*), nevertheless, the arcs of their narratives, as I stated above, also falter and break down at key moments, revealing important mechanical failures in the 'systems' of their stories. There is not room here to detail all of these small failures in both Chaucer's tale and von Trier's film, but two signature moments in each story that seem to pull at and undermine the supposed trajectory of their respective plots stand out. In *The Clerk's Tale*, it is the moment when Walter informs Griselda that he will be taking another wife and that Griselda is to go back to her father's house with the same dowry that she brought with her years earlier, which in point of fact is nothing but the clothes she came in and which are nowhere now to be found. After a somewhat long speech in which Griselda explains that she will 'gladly yield her place' to the new wife (l. 843), the unthinkable happens: she becomes extremely upset at the thought of having to walk home naked, and while she wants Walter to know that she would never 'repent' that she once gave him her heart, and happily gives back to him now her fine clothing and jewels, at the same time, she exclaims, 'O gode God! How gentil and how kynde/Ye semed by youre speche and youre visage/The day that maked was oure mariage!' (ll. 852–854), and then she says she hopes it will not be Walter's 'intent' to do so 'dishonest' a



thing as make her walk back home without some sort of ‘smock,’ like a ‘worm’ (ll. 874–882). It is precisely in the clearly anguished cry of ‘O gode God!’ (which is also a sort of ‘crack’ in Griselda’s ‘pacienc’) that a sort of ‘cross-hatch’ opens to a similar moment in *Breaking the Waves*, when Bess MacNeill is in the hospital emergency room after being severely beaten (and perhaps stabbed?), and just before dying, a similar ‘crack’ in her ‘faith’ opens as she desperately clutches at her sister-in-law Dodo and cries out, ‘Dodo – hold me; I’m afraid. I’m frightened. It’s all wrong!’ The further conclusions of these stories could be argued to be irrelevant in light of these two moments, which, when brought together (in a certain mode of ‘reading’) might create ‘shafts or freight tunnels ... between objects that would otherwise remain quarantined in private vacuums’ (Harman, 2007, 201), and thereby trace and amplify the beautiful, yet terrifying fragility of the world, and all of its *things*, its gatherings of bodies, human and inhuman.

### Only a Preamble

If we are interested in the ways in which a text may be trying to become something other than what its author and even readers intend and expect, we need a metaphysics of reading, and also of the texts themselves, one in which texts and the figures they enclose are not so much human (although they are certainly artifacts and projections of the human) as they are objects – objects, moreover, that, in the words of Graham Harman, are ‘deeper’ than their ‘transient, shifting façade[s],’ and which are also ‘no seamless fusion’ between their deeper realities and façades, but rather, are ‘fatally torn’ between themselves and their ‘accidents, relations, and qualities: a set of tensions that makes everything in the universe possible, including space and time’ (Harman, 2010c, 148, 150). This is another place, similar to Claude Romano’s ‘evential’ hermeneutics, where we might begin to more meaningfully reconfigure the ‘time,’ or ‘temporalities,’ of reading, and to seek new spaces *between* and *around* texts where we might multiply and amplify their irreducibility, ‘counter-sign’ their singularity, and also prepare room for the emergence of voluptuous forms of Otherness (which may also be co-sentient with us in ways we have not yet anticipated).

As Harman has written, all objects – whether rats, cotton, humans, hailstorms, armies, mountains, and so on – ‘hide from one another endlessly, and inflict their mutual blows only through some vicar or intermediary’ (Harman, 2007, 189–190). According to Harman, all objects in the world are always in retreat from each other, always withdrawing, and every possible relation between any two objects is also an object. While Harman doesn’t deny reciprocity and symbiosis and even celebrates them, he insists on a ‘weird realism’ whereby no one real object could ever really ‘touch’ any other real object. Objects can

never be fully exhausted in their relations with any other object; nevertheless, there *are* relations, and Harman uses the term ‘allure’ to describe the distance between any real object and the qualities that stream out of it, constituting the sensual object with which we engage. As he puts it, ‘Whereas real objects withdraw, sensual objects lie directly before us, frosted over with a swirling, superfluous outer shell’ (Harman, 2007, 195). Real objects can only ‘touch’ other real objects indirectly and asymmetrically by way of a sensual object, a ‘vicar of causation,’ as it were (which could be a tree, or a person, or a literary character: the things that exist in our ‘experience’ of them), and this leads to ever more new objects being formed – in other words, new relations, and it is within these larger assemblages of relations where sentience might be taking place. This is an important point: as readers of literary texts, we might start ruminating how, not to project thought *onto* or *into* texts, ‘capturing’ them in our nets of ‘meaning,’ but rather, how to recognize and articulate better all of the ways in which we are inter-subjective *with* texts and the figure-objects they construct (as well as with the author-objects that have produced them).

Reading might then become a more heightened mode of encounter with the traces of a sentience network (or hive or swarm or cascade) that are distributed everywhere – registered by the very ‘shocks’ or ‘intensities’ or ‘vibrations’ or ‘upwellings’ that fellow-travelers Foucault, Moore, and Dinshaw have felt in the archives. I cannot say yet, at length, how this will be accomplished, whether as a form of literary criticism, or commentary, or ‘herbarium,’ or as another mode of fiction that would not call itself fiction *as such*. This is only a preamble.

## About the Author

Eileen A. Joy is an Associate Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where she teaches courses in medieval literature, contemporary fiction, and critical theory. She is the Lead Ingenitor of the BABEL Working Group ([www.babelworkinggroup.org](http://www.babelworkinggroup.org)) and Co-Director of punctum books (<http://punctumbooks.com>), and has published numerous essays and articles on medieval literature, cultural studies, post/humanism, and ethics (E-mail: [eileenajoy@gmail.com](mailto:eileenajoy@gmail.com)).

## References

- Badley, L. 2010. *Lars von Trier*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Bennett, J. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Benson, L.D., gen. ed. 1987. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.



- Björkman, S. 1996. Naked Miracles [Interview with Lars von Trier], trans. Alexander Keiller. *Sight & Sound* 6(10): 10–14.
- Björkman, S., ed. 2003. *Trier on von Trier*, trans. Neil Smith. London: Faber and Faber.
- Breaking the Waves* (DVD), dir. L. von Trier. 1996. Monica, CA: Artisan Home Entertainment.
- Bronfman, J. 1994. *Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale': The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Bryant, L. 2011. *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press.
- Cate, W.A. 1932. The Problem of the Origin of the Griselda Story. *Studies in Philology* 29(3): 389–405.
- Cohen, J.J. 1999. Exorbitance. In *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, ed. J.J. Cohen, 142–184. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dinshaw, C. 2007a. Are We Having Fun Yet? A Response to Prendergast and Trigg. *New Medieval Literatures* 9: 231–241.
- Dinshaw, C. 2007b. Temporalities. In *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. P. Strohm, 107–123. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. 2000. Lives of Infamous Men. In *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1974: Power*, Vol. 3, eds. J.D. Faubion, trans. R. Hurley *et al*, 157–175. New York: The New Press.
- Fradenburg, L.O.A. 2002. Sacrificial Desire in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. In *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*, ed. L.O.A. Fradenburg, 155–175. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gaunt, S. 2006. *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Greene, B. 2011. *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos*. New York: Knopf.
- Griffith, D.D. 1931. *The Origin of the Griselda Story*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Harman, G. 2005. *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago, IL: Open Court.
- Harman, G. 2007. On Vicarious Causation. In *Collapse, Vol. II: Speculative Realism*, ed. R. Mackay. Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic.
- Harman, G. 2009. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne: re.press.
- Harman, G. 2010a. Brief SR/OOO Tutorial. *Object-Oriented Philosophy* (blog), July 23: <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/07/23/brief-srooo-tutorial/>.
- Harman, G. 2010b. A History of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology [talk delivered at conference, 'Hello, Everything: Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology,' University of California-Los Angeles, December 1, 2010]. Podcast audio. *Ecology Without Nature* (blog), December 2: <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2010/12/graham-harmans-talk-on-ooo-and-sr-at.html>.
- Harman, G. 2010c. Space, Time, and Essence: An Object-Oriented Approach (2008). In *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, 140–169. Winchester, UK: Zero Books.
- Harman, G. 2011. *The Quadruple Object*. Hampshire, UK: Zero Books.
- Latour, B. 2004. Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30(2): 225–248.

- Mieville, C. 2009. *The City & The City*. New York: Del Rey.
- Miller, M. 2004. Love's Promise: The *Clerk's Tale* and the Scandal of the Unconditional. In *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex and Agency in the Canterbury Tales*, 216–248. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Milosz, C. 2004. *Second Space: New Poems*, trans. C. Milosz and R. Haas. New York: Ecco Press.
- Mitchell, A. 2005. Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity. *Studies in Philology* 102(1): 1–26.
- Moore, M.E. 2007. An Historian's Notes for a Miloszan Humanism. *Journal of Narrative Theory* 37(2): 191–216.
- Morse, C. 1990. Critical Approaches to the *Clerk's Tale*. In *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, eds. C.D. Benson and E. Robertson, 71–83. Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer.
- Morton, T. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Romano, C. 2009. *Event and World*, trans. S. Mackinlay. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Serres, M. 1982. *The Parasite*, trans. L.R. Schehr. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Severs, J.B. 1942. *The Literary Relationship of Chaucer's Clerks Tale*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Šaviro, S. 2011. The Actual Volcano: Whitehead, Harman, and the Problem of Relations. In *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. L. Bryant, N. Srnicek, and G. Harman, 279–290. Melbourne: re.press.
- Smith, G. 2000. Imitation of Life: Gavin Smith Interviews the Great Dane. *Film Comment* 36(5): 22–26.
- Witmore, M. 2010. We Have Never Not Been Inhuman. *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1(1/2): 208–214.
- Yager, S. 2009. Levinas, Allegory, and Chaucer's Clerk's Tale. In *Levinas and Medieval Literature: The 'Difficult Reading' of English and Rabbinic Texts*, eds. A.W. Astell and J.A. Jackson, 35–56. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Žižek, S. 1999. Death and the Maiden. In *The Žižek Reader*, eds. E. Wright and E. Wright, 206–221. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.