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Drink Me, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying
and Love the Blog

James Goldberg

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

John Bennion, Chair
Chris Crowe
Gideon Burton

Department of English
Brigham Young University

May 2010

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ABSTRACT

Drink Me, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying
and Love the Blog

James Goldberg

Department of English

Master of Fine Arts

Language itself is a technology, and the advent of each major technology of language transmission (from the alphabet to the printing press to the Internet) has changed the range of speaker-audience dynamics which are the starting point for all creative writing. In this thesis, a writer, armed only with his blog archives and a smattering of John Tenniel illustrations, guides the curious reader through various issues raised by creative writing in the blog form. Topics discussed include self-presentation, the juxtaposed brevity and expansiveness of online texts, nonlinear reading, alternative models for revision, the literary possibilities of the hyperlink, speaker-audience-time relationships in online settings, the future of ephemerality, the possibility of digital street theatre, and croquet with live balls and sticks.

Also discussed are: the end of the world, the Partition of India, the political ramifications of labels replacing folders, my great-aunt's death, Wynton Marsalis, Jewish Vikings, democracy in Kahanistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, Elvis Costello, Sheikh Hasina, and the virtues of walking to church. This thesis also contains several introductions, an acknowledgements page, and more chapters than I care to count. A five-dollar bill may or may not be hidden between the digital pages of this thesis.

Keywords: creative writing, blog, hyperlink, revision, online, new media, composition, street theatre, essay, life writing, nonfiction, fiction, Internet, digital, Mormon, ethnic

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every master's student is indebted to his/her committee members for their contributions to the work, but I feel a special debt to those without whom I could not have embarked on this project. Special thanks, then, go to Stephen Tuttle, the Creative Writing area representative, and to Trent Hickman, the English Department Graduate Coordinator, as well as to my committee members for their essential support on this nontraditional and groundbreaking project. I see their support of my project as an indication of their deep respect for their students' work and am encouraged by their willingness to accommodate the unusual.

John Bennion, my committee chair, was impressive in his ability to shift paradigms and vocabularies to fit the project at hand. He consistently helped me to go further in exploring the unique nature of my own project rather than limiting it by bringing it closer to other work. He served as coach as well as editor, and I feel fortunate to count him as a friend.

Gideon Burton was extremely helpful in lending me his perspective as a scholar of new media and the Renaissance—the critical introduction to this work owes much to him—and was a wonderful resource as an active blogger himself. Chris Crowe is one of the finest workshop teachers I've had the opportunity to work with, and provided helpful insight as an expert on the shifts currently taking place in Young Adult literature, many of which are related to our emerging culture of new media.

My wife, Nicole Wilkes Goldberg, was extremely helpful not only as a partner but also as a scholar. Her investment in the study of different cultural modes of life writing added a depth to my blogging which drives my hopes for the form. I would also be remiss not to mention the

contributions of my five-year-old daughter Kira, whose perspectives on the world added an element of magic to my life, and by extension, to the best of my writing.

Thanks, finally, go to the numerous faithful readers and commenters on my blogs, who at the most exciting times became co-creators in the work.

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A NOTE ON FORMAT

Much of this thesis has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to fit your TV. Or PC. Or library. Or something. In any case, there are a bunch of blog passages woven in to a document with no external hyperlinks, and it wasn't easy to do so.

I've made the following decisions in integrating these passages:

1) Most blog excerpts are offset from the remainder of the text through indentation and a font change. In a few instances, I've included a screen shot of a blog element instead.

2) I've removed external hyperlinks but done my best to mark hyperlinked words or terms in underlined blue. Since hyperlinks exert some influence on the text even when left unclicked, I thought it best to leave evidence of them even when they're unclickable.

3) In the chapter on hyperlinking, I've included some internal links to "simulate" the links of the original blog. This is mostly a joke. A few internal links is completely different than a work that's integrated into the larger Internet world of interlinked hypertexts. If you want to play with hyperlinks, go look at the real texts at www.goldbergish.blogspot.com, www.mormonmidrashim.blogspot.com, and www.caucajewmexdian.blogspot.com.

4) I have intentionally not corrected textual errors (inconsistent transliterations, missing words, etc.) in the blog excerpts in order to honestly present some of the surface roughness of my blog texts.

5) Photos in which I appear have been digitally altered to tone down my handsomeness so as not to blind the average reader.

6) References to two unwritten chapters have been retained in the table of contents because repurposing John Tenniel's illustrations in that table is more interesting than whatever I didn't write anyway.

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: ON TECHNOLOGIES OF TRANSMISSION
AND THE EVOLUTION OF LITERATURE

I.

In the summer of 1995, my family relocated from Utah to Ohio. The U-Haul truck in which we carried all our possessions was stolen the night of our arrival in the parking lot of Columbus's Cross-Country Inn. When it was recovered a week or so later, only the items with no clear market value remained. Because of this, I spent the early part of my seventh grade year working on my mother's old typewriter instead of on a computer.

That was one of many reasons why I got a D in English that year. Although I was a competent writer, the teacher took for granted students' technology-enhanced ability to turn in fresh drafts of lengthy assignments on short notice—and I was not the kind of student who was invested enough in academic success to put in extra work to correct for the physical disadvantage of not having a computer. From my teacher's perspective, I'd imagine, my deficiencies had everything to do with paper content and nothing to do with technology. After all, she was a teacher of language, not technology—what business of hers was it what machine I composed on?

Fourteen years and three schools later, I found myself teaching college freshman the subject I had come closest to failing—and did so with the assumption that they had not only computers, but also Internet access. Among the program-mandated assignments for these college freshmen, in fact, was a “multi-modal rhetoric” unit in which mastering specific composition technologies was integral to success. I was still a teacher of language rather than technology, but the two were getting more difficult to divorce in pedagogical practice. According to HASTAC

(the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory), there are at least twenty-three CFPs for sessions at the 2011 Modern Language Association Convention dealing with new media-related topics (par. 3-23). Humanities and Composition Studies have reached a point at which new writing technologies are increasingly difficult to ignore.

In the academic Creative Writing community, however, discussions of new media seem less prominent. In the collection *The Best of the AWP Pedagogy Papers 2010*, which the AWP Pedagogy Team describes as containing “an enlightening variety of perspectives on cutting-edge pedagogical approaches for contemporary creative writing classrooms,” only Emily Hoeflinger’s “Installment Writing: The Cell Phone Novel as Model for Crafting Fictional Moments” recommends having students compose with the new media in mind (1, 4). This dearth of discussion in the central forum for creative writing pedagogy suggests to me a landscape in which creative teachers are underequipped to engage with the new media. At the more anecdotal and local level, my impression is that often-unarticulated questions about whether new media forms can even be considered literary largely preclude more helpful discussions about the specific possibilities and dynamics that might come with various forms of new media creative writing. Failing to experimentally and critically engage with new media, in turn, stunts our innovative productivity—it is very difficult to write better in a new medium when one is blind to the differences between the new medium and the old.

In an eloquent 2000 defense of creative writing as an academic discipline, AWP Executive Director D. W. Fenza argued that creative writing courses are a valuable complement to literature courses because “creative writing courses enable students to study and appreciate

literature as a *living* body of knowledge—one growing and still evolving—one to which they, too, may contribute” (par. 76, emphasis original). If creative writing as an academic discipline remains entrenched in historically traditional forms while literature and composition studies engage with the new media, however, Fenza’s argument loses some of its strength. In order to keep the field as lively and relevant as possible, teachers of creative writing need an increased awareness of the role of technology in literary evolution and change.

II.

“The processes by which genres change are the same as those that produce most literary change” says Alastair Fowler at the outset of his 1982 essay “Transformations of Genre” (233). He then sets himself the ambitious task of articulating nine general categories of the processes which create generic (and by his own extension, literary) change¹. While he acknowledges that “no doubt there are others,” Fowler insists that his nine categories “would be enough in themselves to cover the main changes known to literary history” (233). Fowler’s categories are topical invention, combination, aggregation, change of scale, change of function,

¹ My interest here is not in a discussion of genre per se: my thesis’s own generic identity can best be described by recourse to Derrida’s statement that “every text participates in one or several genres [. . .] yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (230). My interest is more in the processes of change: if we accept Derrida’s claim that texts participate in rather than belong to genres, we must also acknowledge that any increase in the range of available genres produces an exponential proliferation in the number of creative possibilities for each new text. And if we writers have a vested interest in generic proliferation, we also have a vested interest in understanding the processes through which generic innovation has historically occurred.

counterstatement, inclusion, selection, and generic mixture. Changes in writing technology don't make his list and aren't discussed under any of the nine categories that do make his list.

This omission—while perhaps understandable given the pre-Internet publication date—nonetheless strikes me as particularly significant in a document looking to “cover the main changes known to literary history.” Even by 1982, Eric Havelock's 1963 *Preface to Plato* had argued that the advent of the Greek alphabet precipitated a major shift in Greek syntax and thought, and Elizabeth Eisenstein's 1979 *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* had argued that the technological shift from manuscript to print led to a broad shift from “scribal culture” to “print culture,” which was prerequisite to the fifteenth and sixteenth transformations of the Renaissance, Protestant Reformation, and Scientific Revolution. While specific claims by these and like-minded theorists continue to be debated, their broad observation that technologies which radically alter the ways in which language can be stored and transmitted also significantly influence the development of literature seems obvious. Certainly Homer, who did not *write* the poems he composed, also didn't obsess about where to place a line break in the way that my creative writing theory professor tells me that many contemporary poets do: such concerns come when the default medium of transmission includes a written page.

Fowler, however, does not seem to be aware of the extent to which his observations on transformations of genre are contained within a print period and paradigm: while he begins from the assumption that genre is dynamic, he falls victim to an assumption that the page is static. Such assumptions continue to carry a certain institutional weight in academic creative writing: the ubiquitous paradigm of writing toward publication seems to assume either print market

publication or literary journal publication. Even online literary journals overwhelmingly solicit traditional print forms and arrange them in essentially print ways. Graduate seminars rarely draw attention to, let alone question, print as the default mode of literary expression. This has held, in my personal experience, even for courses looking to test the limits of conventional genres: in both Patrick Madden's Fall 2009 seminar on contemporary "Experiments in the Essay" and Kim Johnson's Winter 2010 seminar on "Essaying the Margins: Creative Writing Theory and Intergeneric Texts," all assigned readings accepted the basic constraints of print media despite challenging other generic conventions. Those syllabi, while excellent in many ways, did nothing to acknowledge the possible impact of Internet technology on formal experimentation. It is possible, at this point, to receive an advanced degree in creative writing without being made aware of the field's centuries-old print assumptions and the way they might be challenged by literatures present, future, and even *past*.

At the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, which had the theme "Scriptures as Literature; Literature as Scripture" I gave a presentation entitled "Form and Context: How Audience Illiteracy Shaped the World's Scriptures" in which I argued that a competent poetics of an Isaiah, Muhammad, or Nanak (among others) needed to take into account the role of poetic structure mnemonically and in limiting textual variation/corruption given the still largely oral mass cultures these prophets spoke to. If we are to understand these prophets' poetic choices, I argued, we must recognize that their works were not meant to be encountered on a page; they were composed with oral transmission in mind—as evidenced, for example, by the very name of the Qur'an, literally "the recitation." According to Islamic

tradition, the Qur'an was memorized by tens of thousands during Muhammad's lifetime and only written down on the advice of Umar to Abu Bakr after Muhammad's death. Writing systems, in such a cultural context, appear to have had much more to do with storage than transmission.

Such realities have profound impact on formal choice in creative writing. The prominence of parallel and chiasmic constructions in Isaiah over, say, free verse or Montaigne-style essayistic prose has everything to do with the fact that Isaiah is not composing for a printed page. Montaigne's style, in turn, probably develops less because Montaigne has the genetic makeup of a timeless literary genius, or simply because he comes at a certain space in the order of a natural progression of nine categories of literary mutations, but rather primarily because Montaigne is interested in finding new ways to think and communicate in a period of technological transition, a transition which has given him ample access to printed books by a wide range of past and contemporary authors, access to paper enough for leisure purposes, affordable personal access to a printing press, and a reasonably sized audience that can take these same technologies for granted. His essays, I believe, are a contextual innovation, building off the moment in the culture's adaptation of printing technologies that creates space for them.

Havelock's argument in *Preface to Plato* is similar: that Plato is not simply a new voice in a contextually static Greek philosophical discourse, but rather the first major voice to articulate new theories in response to the shift of Greek culture away from a purely oral mode toward an age of the alphabet in which the intelligentsia increasingly think of the world in terms of confronting and creating written texts. The fixed-ness of a written word, in Havelock's view, enables syntax to develop more fully outside of narrative, making way for the valorization of

abstractions at the core of Plato's theory of forms (260-61). Plato thinks in a way that the relatively recent advent of a flexible writing system made possible.

Is it fair to say that digital technologies constitute humanity's third great revolution in the technologies of linguistic expression? The advent of writing and the advent of the printing press each radically altered the range of practical narrative and poetic choices as well as radically altering the meaning of such choices². Digital technologies, especially the Internet, are once again changing the transmission of information in ways that change the range and meaning of compositional choices. Any theoretical system or curriculum which treats the realities of print as a static backdrop to the formation of literature is not or will not be capable of theorizing the changes we are now experiencing and will continue to experience as new modes of transmission saturate our culture. Cultures of composition ultimately respond to cultures of transmission. Cultures of criticism, in order to maintain maximum theoretical utility, must respond also, as most critics who engage seriously with digital forms quickly conclude. In his introduction to *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth argues that "applying theories of literary criticism to a new empirical field, seemingly without any reassessment of the terms and concepts involved [...] places research in direct danger of turning the vocabulary of literary theory into a set of unfocused metaphors, rendered useless by a translation that is not perceived as such by its very translators" (14). In order to successfully translate our stories into new

² Natasha Trethewey's use of chiasmic constructions, for example, has entirely different motivations and meanings than Isaiah's use of such constructions largely because of their radically different techno-cultural contexts.

technological media, we need a critical vocabulary is aware of the complexity of the current techno-cultural translation.

Contemporary folklorists realize that to record oral sacred stories in writing constitutes a major translation which ethically necessitates critical awareness and conversation. Perhaps the writer and critic living during the advent of the Internet would do well to heed the lesson of the folklorists, being careful and thoughtful about the major translation we don't always realize we're making.

Gideon Burton has argued while the Gutenberg Bible text is barely distinguishable from its handwritten antecedents, while the "legible typeface, headings, versification, cross references, and scholarly notes" of the later Geneva Bible text strikingly reveal the fruits of critical attention to the formal possibilities made practical by new transmission technology (par. 7). Perhaps the writer and critic living at the advent of the Internet would do well to heed the lesson of the Geneva Bible's translators as well, being thoughtful about what might be possible as we translate into a new medium or media.

No revolutions, of course, technological or otherwise, take place and are digested, fully realized, into any culture overnight. Writing systems, in most cultures, were used for economic contracts and accounting well before they played any discernable role in shaping narrative, poetry, philosophy, or language. Gutenberg created his press in the 1450s; the Geneva Bible didn't arrive until 1560, Montaigne's essays until 1580, and e. e. cummings' visually-driven works, arguably another step in the literary exploration of printing press possibility, until the 20th century, five centuries after the technological shift they are responding to.

We don't know what the Internet will look like in fifty, one hundred, or five hundred years. We don't know how the cultural presence of the Internet and its successors will shape other literary forms in those spans of time. We do know, though, that literature no longer needs to be contained primarily in the printed page. We can bemoan that reality and its perceived effects on the larger culture, as many pundits do. We can invest the shift with a mythic significance and assume that the technology will inevitably produce a more utopian condition, as others believe. Or we can look to the past, see that change for good and ill has typically come at the intersection of new technologies with active human innovators³, and begin to explore and experiment.

III.

How are we to develop productive models for critical and pedagogical engagement with new media creative writing? One of the basic assumptions of creative writing as an academic discipline is that *practitioners* will have uniquely valuable critical insights and pedagogical potential. It is as practitioners, then, that our understanding of new media creative writing might most fruitfully develop.

The core layer of my thesis, then, consists of three blogs: www.goldbergish.blogspot.com, www.mormonmidrashim.blogspot.com, and www.caucajewmexdian.blogspot.com, in which I attempt speak from my heritage and identity while exploring the literary possibilities of a new technology of literary transmission. This

³ Martin Luther and Adolf Hitler, for example, were both arguably masters of their own eras' new media.

project owes a significant debt to the open-minded professors in Brigham Young University's English Department who supported my request to embark on a thesis project outside the program's own traditional print paradigm—innovation and experimentation are always easier with support from leaders in a given institution.

Because the University, however, still at a midpoint in its own gradual transition away from a print-only paradigm, currently dictates that all theses be submitted to the library as .pdf documents with no external links, I later added a second layer to my thesis project. Rather than translating my blogs (or excerpts thereof) into the required format for purposes of the requirement (and losing much in translation), I elected to compose a .pdf document in which I raise various issues related to Internet creative writing—a sort of creative critical introduction to some of the implications of my online text.

I've structured the chapters of the second layer of the thesis around John Tenniel illustrations from the original *Alice in Wonderland* as a sort of nod to Isaiah: that is, as an admission of the continued importance of mnemonic concerns in composition. Hopefully, the images and the core gestures of each chapter will be sufficient to make memorable the handful of observations I've made about the possibilities of blogs specifically and online forms generally in creative writing. While the rapid pace of change *within* new media will likely make many of my specific arguments feel dated within the next few years, I anticipate that my focus on core gestures, rather than on definitive analysis, will extend the "shelf life" of this text: while specific contexts change, I imagine that the issues raised by this thesis about post-page creative composition will continue to occupy us for some time.

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**DRINK ME, OR: HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING
AND LOVE THE BLOG**



“Once or twice she peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, ‘and what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice, ‘without pictures or conversations?’”

“How queer is everything today! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night?”

Introduction

I hate writing. On this point, I think it is important that we are clear up front. Yes, I have authored numerous plays, essays, short stories, poems, and even a few short film scripts. Yes, I am currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing. Yes, I compulsively turn to pen, paper, keyboard—even crayon if necessary—to scrawl down thoughts whenever I am not otherwise occupied. It may also be true that I mentally compose drafts in the shower and while driving, and that when my daughter wakes me up in the middle of the night to tell me she’s lost her bear, I mumble something incoherent about genre and fall back asleep.

All of this may make me a writer, but *not* someone who loves writing. There is a difference. I like to think; I like to talk; I like to dream out loud; I love playing with language

with the reckless abandon of a kid whose parents could only afford that one toy. But I hate writing. I hate losing layers of the human and interactive vibrancy of a good conversation as I try to force thoughts into the narrow confines of paper. I hate thinking about how to please a publisher and find an audience you can point to on a demographics chart and maybe someday get my name on a check after I finish marketing a piece. And oh how I hate the pretentious parts of the academic arena of writing—which, unfortunately, seems to be the clearest available economic alternative to mass publication.

Maybe most of all, though, I hate writing because when I write, I often feel as if I am trying to carve wounds into dead trees in the hopes that they will still bleed. Who exactly, I keep asking myself, shall I make them bleed for?

Certainly not to please the remarkably long professor who puffs on a hookah between pronouncements of his most fervent peeves about the decline in craft since Montaigne. Probably also not for the two hundred subscribers to the *Obscure Review* literary magazine, which recently published several experiments billed as significant advances on the most distant frontier of the Kingdom of Literature—a frontier so distant, in fact, that only a dozen living people have actually ever *been* there. Also probably not for an audience of one favorite dead poet, like a Serious Writer I know says she does. She makes dead trees weep tears of blood across an ocean onto the grave of John Donne. For all my education, though, I'm still not quite sure who John Donne is and whether I'm spelling his name right or not.

How am I supposed to love writing for no one at all?

This summer I took a long, hard look at myself in some literal and metaphorical mirrors. “James,” I said to myself (since my name is James) “you’re never going to be a Serious Writer. You haven’t read Literature. You haven’t even read the CliffsNotes on most Literature. All you’ve read, in fact, are the two-page summaries in your parents’ copy of *The Great American Bathroom Book* and you’ve been using that knowledge to fake your way through school ever since.”

“That’s not entirely true,” I said back to myself, “I once read several chapters of *The Brothers Karamazov*.”

But I just took another hard mirror-look at myself and went on “It’s not just that you don’t read. You also don’t write! All good writers,” I said to me, “are daily writers. Not only constantly thinking and composing, but also constantly writing things down. And then getting their work out to an audience and seeing how people interact with it. If you can’t do that,” I said to me, “you’ll never amount to anything. You’re too old to keep putting daily writing off. Do you want to be too late?”

I blushed. “OK. You’ve got a point,” I said. “But how,” I asked me, “can I ever get myself to write, let alone interact with an audience, on a daily or near-daily basis?”

That’s when I showed me the rabbit hole in my computer.

Which is basically the story of how my blogging began.

This book is not the story of my blogs: their natural habitat is online, and I’m afraid they can’t be coaxed out of it. This book is a collection of experiences which may be useful to those

who have wondered just how deep the rabbit hole our world is beginning to fall into might be able to go. . .

Table of Subsequent Contents:



Blog Identity

In which I discuss how the doors of writing are all too small for a whole personality, or; why write three blogs?



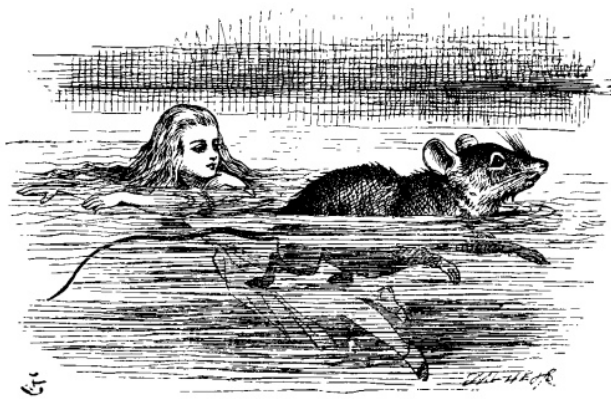
The Post

On the post as the basic unit of blog writing, or; how I finally started writing (almost) every day.



The Text

In which attention is drawn to the expansiveness of Internet texts, or; turning the Talmud inside-out.



Non-linear reading

On writing texts in which shape can only be suggested, not dictated, or; my grandmother has been reading the end of novels first since at least the 1950s and I feel the need to catch up.



Workshop and Revision

In which the Internet demands that conventional models for revision be re-examined, or; what I would tell the Caterpillar if I took one of his workshops again.



Hyperlinking

On hyperlinks as a field of literary possibility, or; how I learned to stop worrying and love the Cheshire Cat.



Audience Time

On serving an audience which is always running late, or; shapes of interaction between letters, people, and time.



Ephemerality

Are online forms more ephemeral than print ones?, or; off with its head!



Digital Street Theatre

In which the audience gets involved in a big way, or; the two weeks communists ruled my blog



Recontextualizing

A chapter I didn't write on the way the blogs constantly give and are given dozens of new contexts, or; how to approach a raven as though it were a writing desk

so that her idea of the tale was something like
this:—"Fury said to

a mouse, That
he met in the
house, 'Let
us both go
to law: I
will prose-
cute you.—
Come, I'll
take no de-
nial: We
must have
the trial;
For really
this morn-
ing I've
nothing
to do.'
Said the
mouse to
the cur,
'Such a
trial, dear
sir, with
no jury
or judge,
would
be made
ing up
trials.'
'I'll be
judge,
and
you
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the
cur
shall
be
jury
'
'I'll
be
judge,
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judge,
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cur
shall
be
jury

Multimodality

a chapter

I didn't write

than it typically gets credit

in which

text itself is far more multimodal

for being

I point out that



“...she came upon a low curtain she had not noticed before, and behind it was a little door about fifteen inches high...”

Blog Identity

In a letter to a friend, the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith once wrote, “Oh Lord God deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.” In the original document, the word “broken” comes at a line break, and is itself split in two.

Writing, a technology at once ancient and incredibly advanced, can’t compare to the even older and more sophisticated technology we call the human brain in terms of expressing identity.

That is to say that my mind, as a complex network of endlessly expanding and cross-referencing synapses, can contain a far more complicated and interesting sense of self than I will ever be able to bring to bear on any subject in the left-to-right linearity and discreet unit sizes which writing necessitates. My brain will always be a more sophisticated text than whatever written texts it is able to produce.

Writing is like trying to pass through a fifteen-inch-high door. It's simply not possible to take your whole self into a text. In a spoken conversation, maybe, it's possible. Though all of you may not ever come up, it's always theoretically there for a conversation partner to access. When you carve yourself onto dead trees, though, a subsequent would-be interlocutor has no such access to the potential whole.

This reality has haunted me as a writer. I mention Partition while explaining something else in an essay: my teacher puts a question mark next to the word on the text. I try to talk about something involving my faith: BYU workshop respondents send comments wondering whether my audience is also Mormon. I decide to go at things from a humor-driven angle instead: a friend wonders if the piece would be as funny if she didn't know my voice and couldn't imagine me reading it.

A blog is hardly a golden key for solving such problems. Even in a digital world, writing increases the range of people who have access to us while limiting the amount of access these people have. A writer must recreate an image of herself or himself when crossing over into any written world.

When I stepped through the rabbit hole to write on the Internet, I recreated myself three times. Through one too-small door I tried to pass my public, playful voice. Through another, I tried to place a spiritual voice that spoke into and around my faith's sacred texts. Through a third, I tried to fit a voice carrying family memory of ethnic experience. And then, because the Internet makes such things relatively simple, I started building plenty of doors between the three selves so that a reader in any one of those worlds can work his/her way gradually toward a fuller interaction with my whole self.

Please feel free to feed the animals during this guided tour of my three blog selves, and my attempts to weave them together:

First Stop: Goldbergish



I have been an avid liar for years. My philosophy of lies goes something like this: if your lie is so ridiculous that a reasonable person, as defined by California state law, can tell that you're lying, then it's not really a lie so much as a game. I like games. A good game can help keep thinking fresh; a ridiculous lie can serve to connect ideas more promiscuously and productively than standard modes of reasoning allow.

I know this because when he visited me after my cancer surgery, the testicle fairy told me so. He said, “Talk too smart and people will think you’re pretentious. Talk smart but insane and people will let you help them laugh.”

“Every laugh,” he said, “is the birth of a new synapse in someone’s brain. Make them laugh enough, and pretty soon they’ll be smarter than you!”

When I’m out with friends, my voice veers, more often than not, toward the brazenly dishonest and the surreal. It’s the most public core part of who I am. But how could I translate that into a blog space?

My first-ever blog post was this:

Tuesday, June 23, 2009

The Truth is Out There...

that is to say, the truth is not here and seldom will be. Just a heads up.

Posted by James Goldberg at 12:19 PM 

To which my sister almost immediately responded:

1 comments:



a.k.a. Olivia said...

way to be truthful about that.

June 23, 2009 12:46 PM

That beginning set the parameters for the *My Life and Hard Times* blog as an openly dishonest account, in direct opposition to the assumed honesty that is a dominant generic feature of the blog form. Since that day, I've written surreal updates on my life, reviewed nonexistent books that I've read and nonexistent movies I've watched. I've covered the news from Iran with the help of inside information I get from being Facebook friends with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and shared anecdotes from some of my unusual social circles, such as the local Apocalypse Club. What people get from me online is not altogether different than what they get from me in real life, where I am constantly saying ridiculous things to provoke thought. Which is why, for several months, the blog's subtitle was "It's like a biopsy of my brain on paper (except for the paper part, I guess. Sorry.)"

Second Stop: Mormon Midrashim

MORMON MIDRASHIM

STORIES AND COMMENTARY ON LDS SCRIPTURES

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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2010

Confounded Language! --Genesis 11:7

"Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

This confounding did not consist of splitting one language into multiple languages, and thus rendering only small groups comprehensible to each other. When the Gods confounded the language, it was by replacing the pure Adamic language with a more fallen one, which failed to reliably express meaning the way the old language had. And to this very day, our language is still such that two people speaking the same language often only believe that they are actually understanding one another.

(I have a strong testimony of at least the last sentence of this midrash.)

POSTED BY JAMES GOLDBERG AT 8:32 AM ✎
 LABELS: LANGUAGE

THE AUTHOR



Check out www.yankles.com ✂

FAVORITE POSTS

- Intro to this Blog
- A Glimpse through the Veil

There are countless brilliant writers who love questioning audience assumptions and beliefs. The ability to question or be questioned, after all, is one of the chief treasures of conversation—and by extension, of literature. Some of these writers are so fervent in their quests to question that they can fairly be described as holding nothing sacred. That phrase becomes a sort of investigative/interrogative credential.

I'm a Mormon, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For me, numerous things are sacred—and I wouldn't want to live without a sense of sacredness. How do you speak about the sacred, though, in an online sphere?

My second attempt to pass a part of myself through a too-small door into the realm of the written involved creating a separate space for my religious voice. Four days after starting my first blog, I created a second one with the name *Mormon Midrashim* and wrote this post:

Saturday, June 27, 2009

[Why these strange stories? -- Joshua 1:8](#)

They wept for thirty days when Moses died, and I am surprised that they found it in themselves to stop. Yes, they'd complained about him. Yes, various attempts had been made, in fits of panic, to assassinate him and go back to Egypt, begging to be slaves again. But in clearer moments, who really doubted Moses? He had staked all their lives on his visions and revelations, again and again, and emerged victorious. He had performed great miracles. He had done what no other prophet in Israel would do for a long, long time and spoken with God face-to-face.

And now he was dead.

And his people? They were stranded in a desert, camped on a hill from which they could view God's impossible promise of a sacred land. For a leader, they had Joshua, a man whose resume was decent enough, but who they were ready to follow mostly because

Moses had "laid his hands upon him." ([Deut. 34: 9](#))

How might Joshua have felt in the period just after Moses' death?

Was this man, who never doubted Moses, tempted to doubt himself?

The Biblical account implies that he did, because in four verses of admonition ([Josh. 1: 6-9](#)), the Lord tells Joshua three times to "be strong and of good courage." Nestled in the injunction to confidence is also this piece of advice:

"This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success."

I love that image: "this book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth"--possibly mostly because I naturally talk a lot, but also because since the days of Moses, strength in the Judeo-Christian tradition has been drawn primarily from our commitment to sacred texts, and our ability to hold them in our mouths and minds, day

and night, as a means of living according to their injunctions and ideals.

In an [essay](#), soon to be published in a special issue of [Mormon Artist](#) magazine, I discuss the problems of maintaining such memory by sheer repetition, the tendency of the rote to remove itself from our active consciousness. The kinds of discourse and meditation the Lord calls for in Joshua 1:8, I believe, involve finding new ways to think about foundational truths as a means of keeping them alive and active enough in us to be applied in a productive way. Repentance, after all, is hardly a rote process: it demands a certain level of self-awareness that demands that we connect our knowledge, not simply repeat it.

This is perhaps why Jews, for thousands of years, have been interested in Biblical commentary. It's not, I think, out of a desire to add anything to what God has said; it's because the sages have recognized the importance of connecting ideas, of giving fresh perspectives on existing passages and principles, of keeping revelation alive with attention.

The midrashim were a particular form of attention given to Biblical text that focused less on exact interpretation than on providing accompanying information or perspectives. Midrashim aren't necessarily supposed to be authoritative or definitive, they're a way of getting the student to engage with the text in new ways that reach toward deeper, and more broadly applicable, understanding.

In the vague spirit of that tradition, I'd like to begin offering some of my thoughts on scriptures and gospel living. I am, by no means, under the illusion that my ideas are authoritative or even correct, but if they're interesting enough to keep me and a few of you meditating on the scriptures, giving us more to talk about so we hold the law in our mouths, then I will consider these works a success.

Posted by James Goldberg at [12:30 PM](#) 

Labels: [OT](#)

Since then, I've been not only commenting on passages of scripture but also trying out new modes of commentary, trying to share something of my lifelong dance with sacred texts. The blog exists, I feel, in an important space between secularism and fundamentalism: by its defining mode of inquiry, which assumes a sacred plurality of meaning, it resists at once the

notion that scriptures are ordinary man-made texts and the notion that any given set of interpretation can ever complete and close our relationship with scripture.

Third Stop: Caucajewmexdian

MONDAY, JANUARY 25, 2010

Good friends



Friends invite you over for dinner.

Good friends have a custom-made picture as their desktop background when you get there.

When Gmail was first trying to grab significant market share, one of the features it touted was its system of labels rather than folders. In a folder system, emails are filed by determining which category they belong to. Labels, in contrast, allow an email to participate in multiple categories simultaneously.

Organizationally, labels are more useful than folders. Gmail's rapid success may have come in part because many people quickly recognized that. There are probably few people, though, who see Gmail's adoption of labels instead of folders as a profound political victory quite the way I do. Because I come from an ethnically mixed background—against the backdrop of an American history saturated with hostility toward “race mixing”—the idea of label-thinking overtaking the folder-thinking that motivates lynchings and Partitions is encouraging, to say the least.

The third voice I tried to give a virtual home was the voice of family history and ethnic experience. “Caucajewmexdian” the word I used as the title of this third blog, was brand-new to Google's vast lexicon at the time.

Here's the first post:

Sunday, July 5, 2009

Are you part of India?

It's a question my daughter-to-be asked me maybe a dozen times before turning it into a statement. I don't know quite what she means by that, but I think that has more to do with the complexity of the subject than with the fact that she was four when she asked (she turned five yesterday--on the Fourth of July. We celebrated her birthday with a parade and fireworks and lots of food. Is she part of

America?) Adults want to know exactly the same things she does but usually ask in terms of ethnic background, where I'm "from," etc. The words we adults use aren't any clearer than Kira's simple question. "Are you part of India?"



Kira & I (photo by my sister Lis)

If anything, they're less clear. Kira told me on Thursday when I skipped dinner that I "smelled like roti"--we hadn't told her we'd snuck off to India Palace to celebrate a friend's successful thesis defense, but she knew. Kira says that the bhangra CD she loves to dance to is "part of India," as are the kurta pajama I wear

sometimes and a few of the evening stories I tell. She is probably aware that India is also a physical place, something like Florida where she knows she spent her earliest childhood and where some relatives live...but I don't think that she thinks the place is what India *is*. India is some mix of all these elements, some groups of people and things, that she is aware I am somehow inexorably connected with. I am part of India, she has decided, and somewhere in her mind I think she's still mapping out the rest.

Adults ask their questions for different reasons and with different emphases. They see my face and want an explanation as to why I look different than they do. For many, there's still a sense that face and place still must be closely connected (after all, they *do* rhyme), which simplifies questions but complicates the answers. Where can I possibly say that I'm from that will explain what they want to know? They're hoping for an answer about the world that will explain me, as opposed to finding things out about me that help give them access to new corners of the world. Kira, still relatively new to the world, is willing to work a little bit both ways, but seems to give preference to the latter.

I've wondered, for years, whether we should teach most of history this way. Instead of starting with the big events that affected everyone, why not start with some people's stories and go on to show which events and identities they were part of?

Maybe the intersections people embody would shed more light on history than the categories we would love to create.

Posted by James Goldberg at 3:30 PM 

In this blog I've gone on, with my sister as an occasional guest poster, to retell old family stories, to meditate on what culture is and how it gets transmitted in conditions like ours, in which minority cultures are mixing with each other, to explore my connections to various parts of the world, and to give some sense to my audience about issues arising in my cultures.

Last Stop: More Little Doors Between the Gardens

“The thing I love about your blogs,” said Sandra Tayler, winner of the Association for Mormon Letters’ first online writing award, “is that someone can get to know one part of you, and then be confronted with another, which forces them to recreate their narrative of who you are. That’s something we’re doing in life all the time, so it’s neat to see an online project that so actively invites it.”

An important part of the way I construct identity in my blogs is by interconnecting them. I want people to get from one part of me to the others. To know that someone who is funny is also very Mormon, that someone who is Mormon is also sort of an Indian and sort of a Jew. It's interesting: most theorists who want to talk about the Internet as having positive, even utopian, political implications focus on greater power apparently allotted to the reader in an online writer-reader relationship. For me, though, the most politically promising elements of online writing structures are those which revealing interconnections. It's both personally and politically liberating to be able to write a self that is woven together across multiple frames of reference.

So, how does someone find out that the court jester at www.goldbergish.blogspot.com is the Mormon rabbinical student at www.mormonmidrashim.blogspot.com and also the multiethnic commentator and family historian at www.caucajewmexdian.blogspot.com?

Ah, let me count the ways!

1) A blogroll on the side of each blog features links to the other two, and a brief preview of their most recent posts. The one on *Mormon Midrashim* today, for example, looked like this.

MY BLOG LIST

B **Caucajewmexdian**
Great news! U.S. Army
accommodates Sikhs - Khalsa Sikh
service in the United States
military began in World War
One, in the days before Indians,
being "non-white" could become
legal citizens of this...
2 days ago

B **My Life and Hard Times**
A thank you to 2% of Americans
- Yesterday, the U.S. House of
Representatives passed a
long-debated healthcare bill in
the hopes that voting Americans
will have some idea what it's
about b...
3 days ago



2) Anyone who goes to my Blogger profile sees links to all three blogs.

My Blogs

[Mormon Midrashim](#)

[My Life and Hard Times](#)


[Caucajewmexdian](#)

3) Hyperlinks within posts from each blog often link to the other blogs. For example, the post “Coming Soon! (Well, in Eight Weeks)” on *My Life and Hard Times* links to other posts on the same blog four times, to posts on *Mormon Midrashim* twice, and to *Caucajewmexdian* once. As the body of writing on each blog grows, the number of bridges between the blogs increases.

Home About Lern 2 Read Gud

FRIDAY, AUGUST 28, 2009

Coming Soon! (Well, in Eight Weeks)



Check out our Ersatz Registry!

Read about Our Song!


Look at a profound thought or two from Nicole!

See Kira! See Kira jump!

...and then come to our wedding party.

POSTED BY JAMES GOLDBERG AT 9:00 AM

THE AUTHOR



Time travel. See it; believe it.

MY BLOG LIST

- Mormon Midrashim**
A Thought on Polygamy - No scripture this time, just a thought. I am hardly alone in my occasional discomfort over the historical association between Mormonism and polygamy, and s...
2 days ago
- Caucajewmexdian**
Great news! U.S. Army accomodates Sikhs - Khalsa Sikh service in the United States military began in World War One, in the days before Indians, being "non-white" could become legal citizens of this...
2 days ago

BLOG ARCHIVE

- ▶ 2010 (33)
- ▼ 2009 (82)
 - ▶ December (6)
 - ▶ November (10)
 - ▶ October (6)

Links to the other blogs are in the post text and on the blog roll to the side,

while a brief explanation of the three blog project is available under the About tab above.

4) The “About” tab at the top of each blog starts by describing the blog’s membership in the set of three.

None of this, of course, obligates anyone to interact with me in all three forms. It does, however, serve to consistently remind the fan of a given blog that there’s more to the author than any given form of dialogue allows.

End-of-the-Tour Observations

Whether you are a play-lie-loving devout Mormon from a Caucajewmexdian family or not, writing presents inevitable obstacles to presenting a full self. When I began to blog, I decided that creating three different spaces for different parts of myself would be the best way to give my mind the spaces it needed to reach out toward a digital audience from across the world. Because of the online form, it's also easy to let the three selves reference each other, suggesting the underlying interconnectedness of seemingly disparate elements of my identity.

When my grandfather was twelve, the Punjab he'd grown up in—a place in which Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus had lived interdependently for centuries—was torn apart by the violence that accompanied a problematic Partition. My grandfather was Sikh. His best friend, Shafee, was Muslim. The border that tore Muslims here and Sikhs there had to cut through a part of my grandfather's heart.

As the Internet continues to reshape literacy, will we find better ways to categorize identity? It remains to be seen whether the Internet will serve more to promote a sense of inexorable interconnection among people, or to create spaces in which increasingly fragmented ideological groups go to more narrowly define themselves and more carefully norm their views to that of their new digital-ideological community.

What will the world do with the Internet's near-infinite number of tiny doors?



“However, this bottle was *not* marked ‘poison,’ so Alice ventured to taste it...”

“‘What a curious feeling!’ said Alice. ‘I must be shutting up like a telescope!’”

On The Post

Living in Germany, I learned that America is known less for its largesse than by its largeness. Returning tourists spread the news: everything from the drinks to the cars to the houses is supersized, the people themselves balloon with lipidy abundance. If form were to match content, the Great American Novel would sprawl like our suburbs across thousands of pages and probably read best when covered in corn syrup and deep fried in carbonated oil.

Does Size Matter?

Working against four hundred years of Manifest Destiny, the post invites readers to delight in the diminutive. A Big Gulp post is a rarity, and possibly an abomination. The point is not to trap the reader, not to race toward an ecological endpoint by equating better with more.

The project of the post is to put a petite portion on the plate. Can you satisfy in less than two hundred words?

The Mode is the Thesis

Because of brevity, it's difficult to develop a full-fledged argument. The reader can't afford to simply listen to what you say, but must watch what you do: the mode becomes the thesis, the way you raise your questions is itself the central gesture in most of the best blogs, from *Cakewrecks* to *The Secret Diary of Steve Jobs*. On *Mormon Midrashim*, the concept of creative scriptural commentary matters more than the content of each post. On *My Life and Hard Times*, the positioning of the posts between fact and fiction invites readers to question reality. There's no need to say everything in a day; it's enough to suggest a way in which things can be said.



“Now I’m opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!”

“But if I’m not the same, the next question is “Who in the world am I?”
Ah, that’s the great puzzle!”

On The Text

When I was in second grade, I happened to pick up a book called *The Two Towers* in our elementary school library. I began to read and found myself transported to a world in which two people (who eventually turned out to be hobbits, not people) were in grave danger for no apparent reason. I had no idea where I was, who I was reading about, or what was going on—a feeling at once disorienting and exhilarating.

After some searching, I found that this strange sensation came because the book claimed to be the second in a trilogy. Unlike second installments in most trilogies, however, this book did nothing to play catch-up for the late reader. It simply continued exactly where the previous book

(which was not available in our little school library) left off. It was almost as if the designation of trilogy was entirely arbitrary and this was actually a severed portion of a single book—which, I discovered later in life, is exactly what it was.

Perhaps because online reading is seldom linear, online writers tend to pay more attention to the subunits of their structure than did Tolkien. All blogs, by definition, share the basic unit of the post. All also are contained within a larger frame that calls itself “blog.” Between these two, in many blogs, are other units we might call the thread (a continuing narrative that calls attention to its sequential nature), the subgenre (say, a music Friday, or simply an irregular pattern or writing book reviews), or the topic (a continuing concern that pops up without the narrative unity of the thread or the formal unity of the subgenre, but might nonetheless be marked with a tag or label).

A description of these units, however, is not sufficient to give a sense of the size of the blog as a text. Most blogs, for example, include external hyperlinks—should the pages these links lead to be considered part of the text? What about the pages those pages lead to? Structures and ideas can also be spread through mimicry and adaptation quickly on the Internet. A blog expands not only downwards into its subgenres, threads, and posts, but also upwards and outwards as the genre of the blog itself gives birth to posts in other blogs, to whole new blogs, perhaps to printed books, etc. For example: I recently found another writer, via Google, who ran across my blog and started writing his own “Mormon Midrashim” as a subgenre on his blog. Also: on Facebook, a friend mentioned having borrowed from me the idea of keeping three

blogs: in his case, familial, professional, and religious. Their choices are, in some ways, extensions of my text.

How can we understand the telescoping shape of these strange creatures that expand both up and down, inward and outward? Perhaps it would be best to turn back to the end of the world nineteen-hundred-and-forty years ago before attempting to answer this question.

The Role of Text after the End of the World

When Jesus was alive, he predicted—correctly—that the world would end before his generation passed away. To this day, however, few non-Jews are aware that the world ended on the 9th of Av in the year 3829 (in the Western Calendar, 30 July in 70 AD) when the Romans destroyed the Temple.

It's difficult for those of us born long after Christ's world ended to comprehend what the Destruction of the Temple and subsequent scattering of the people meant. Suppose for a moment that the world is made real by a single concentrated point of connection with heaven. Now suppose that connection is violently severed. The world ceases to be real, then, see? It ceases to exist—and what are the survivors supposed to do about that?

History says this: after the world God had created in six days had ended, the surviving sages created a new world in the six orders of a book of memory they built over the course of four generations and called the Mishnah. So much of the context of their memories had been lost, however, that it took another three hundred years for hundreds of rabbis to build an entrance into the new world. This ante-world was built out of the words of their commentary and debates and

was called the Gemara. Because context remakes every text, the ante-world remade the world.

Thus, only Mishnah and Gemara together are the Talmud.

After another five hundred years, however, the context for the second layer of commentary (the Gemara) had also been lost, so the great Rabbi Rashi had to add yet another layer of commentary to recreate the world once more. Unfortunately, Rashi died just before writing the last words that would have completed this re-creation, and only two hundred years of commentary by the finest rabbis in Europe (the Tosafists) were able to make up for the missing phrases for him.

When this written world was printed in entirety for the first time, in Venice during the 16th century, the pages looked something like this:



The unwritten center of the Talmud is the Temple and the ancient Jewish world it anchored, lost now for almost 2000 years. Written in place of and around that foundational layer are layers of commentary from an overwhelming polyphony of voices, voice which expand, contradict, invent context, imagine, restrict, explain, and occasionally wonder.

The Structure of a Blog

—inverts Talmudic structure. In the Talmud, the ancient is placed in the center and the layers work their way out. In a blog, the voice of commentary puts itself in the center, in the form of posts which (mimicking the Talmud) await another layer of comments by another school

of commentators. But the post is not the text. The post points toward the blog. And over time, the blog, either through electronic hyperlinks or the older linguistic hyperlinks of allusion, likewise points outside of itself. To ancestors, perhaps. To scriptures. To the ongoing dialogue of democracy, or perhaps again of cooking, or perhaps simply to the Ur-dialogue on the passage of human bodies through time.

All dialogues which are pointing outwards in every direction, back toward the Garden of Eden, forward until the next Apocalypse, and sideways, diagonal, and up and down.

An Attempt at Examples

There are obvious limitations in trying to demonstrate this outwardly-expansive potential of blogs on a more traditional page. The translation necessarily removes the blog's visual framing and interactivity. It removes the cross-referencing and outward-pointing hyperlinks. It just so happens that the blog posts which visitors saw at the end of February are sufficiently outward-pointing to suggest the patterns I am attempting to gesture at without the overt Internet elements.

Let's start with *Mormon Midrashim*:

Friday, February 26, 2010

[How did Salem differ from Sodom and Gomorrah?](#)

[-- Isa 1: 9](#)

"Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, *and* we should have been like unto Gomorrah." ([Isa 1: 9](#))

I was struck, this week in Sunday School, by the existence of one righteous city, Melchizedek's Salem, at the same time there are two wicked cities: Sodom and Gomorrah. Maybe it's just coincidence.

Or maybe:

In the days of Terah, Abraham's father, there was one great city in the land of Canaan. In it, people were mostly part-wicked and part-good, but disagreed vehemently about how to go about both their wickedness and goodness. They gradually split into two factions, each faction aiming at a different half of righteousness, each officially indulging a different half of wickedness.

As the city became increasingly polarized, it became difficult to keep the peace: shepherds left their flocks wander as they shouted taunts at rival shepherds, water-carriers dropped their jugs in the midst of heated debates, even the midwives had difficulty focusing on births when the subject of factional ideologies came up, and,

politics on their minds, would train new mothers to nurse only on one side.

Finally, the leaders of each faction met to decide the future of the city through a debate which would end only when one agreed that the other was right. The debate, however, lasted through the day and then through the night and soon it became an accepted fact of life that the factions' leaders could be heard at any hour roaring so loudly at each other that it became difficult to carry on a conversation over breakfast, to keep one's mind clear during evening prayers, and even simply to sleep.

No one know quite how a certain young boy silenced them, but afterward he became known by the name Melech-Zedek, "king of holiness," for teaching that compromise could be found if each would continue to advocate their preferred half of righteousness, but also be mindful of the other faction's critique of their preferred side of wickedness.

Many of the inhabitants of the city followed these teachings and learned to see their neighbors as the other half of a divine balance

or paradox. Others, however, stayed faithful to the full orthodoxies of their own factions, ultimately deciding to create pure cities isolated from their different-minded neighbors.

One faction turned to the left and founded Sodom; the other turned to the right and founded Gomorrah.

Those who still had much in common with the founders of Sodom but would listen to their neighbors, who still had much in common with the founders of Gomorrah, began to call their own city, which was the remnant of the old single city, "Salem" meaning "peace."

Posted by James Goldberg at [3:18 PM](#) 

1 comments:



[lionofzion](#) said...

C. S. Lewis says something rather like this, near the end of Mere Christianity:

"The devil...always sends errors into the world in pairs-- pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time

thinking which is the worse. You see why, of course? He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one. But do not let us be fooled."

I think there's a lot of truth to this. I've seen it happen in my own mind.

[February 27, 2010 6:46 PM](#) 

This Mormon midrashic tale, like the midrashim of the Talmudic era, speaks to at least three old scriptural stories (those of Sodom and Gomorrah, Terah and Abraham, and Melchizedek and Salem) at the same time that it addresses a contemporary culture of polarization. The positioning of this post immediately after an extended thread in this blog on the religious implications of universal healthcare accentuates the political situating of the piece.

In the Talmud, this would be marginalia, inspired by a systematic study of the core text. In the Internet, this voice of commentary is centered and points outward toward the scripture and toward a larger political debate.

From *My Life and Hard Times*:

Friday, February 26, 2010

[Kingdom of Ten Thousand Years](#)

The Apocalypse came and the dead rose from their graves, but there was no Messiah.

So begins the plot of *Kingdom of Ten Thousand Years*, which Faye recently lent me. What remains after this resurrection-without-redemption is an extremely difficult politics as groups with entirely different understandings try to live in society alongside each other. Germanic tribes struggle to adjust to a world far too crowded for their migratory way of life. Renaissance thinkers leave tight-knit neighborhoods of their century's former inhabitants and wander through the cities, trying to take everything in. Ancient African nobles try to use their influence over former subjects to get nice jeeps and build McMansions.

Initially, twenty-first century governments stay more or less intact, but the issues of how to accommodate the extra billions of people reveal deep-seated differences between different segments of the never-dead population. How many inhabitants should an overcrowded Europe be allowed to send to America? How much religious freedom should be granted to the often shocking faiths of the past? Should divorces be handled according to the customs of the couple in question's time and place, or should society have one standard divorce law? And what about

language--is there room in England for schools to teach Old English?

As the newly risen begin to adapt to the new system, vote, and attempt to assert their influence, the conflicts between centuries eclipse many old and bitter conflicts between contemporaries. Old rivals like the Medicis and Strozzi, for example, drop old differences to work together in defense of their worldview. Lancaster and York, Mughals and Marathas, likewise see each other in a new light. Twenty-first century U.S. Republicans and Democrats begin to feel they have more in common with each other than they had ever thought possible before, and that have hard feelings for the nineteenth-century versions of their parties, and some progressively serious differences with many of the Founding Fathers. Trust between these different factions erodes quickly as levels of violence increase...

The story that eventually unfolds is one of increasingly repressive and brutal autocracy by the natives of the present and their allies in the face of a thousand challenges from the past. But it reads as particularly poignant because as a twenty-first century reader, you tend to side with the never-dead in the book. How are they supposed to react when the standard levels of domestic violence in medieval ghettos escalates into a pattern of murders of wives and daughters who try to leave? And how are they

supposed to react when virulently anti-Semitic Christian extremists from the early Reformation period assassinate a Jewish scientist as part of what turns out to be a plot to get their hands on a nuclear bomb?

This is one dark and wild ride through the future into a churning mess of the past.

Posted by James Goldberg at [1:39 PM](#) 

Labels: [books](#), [Club](#)

1 comments:



[Isaac](#) said...

After I read that book, I got the impression that one of the underlying themes was that people from all generations face the same problems in interpersonal relationships. I suppose that's what the author discovered after doing the research necessary to accurately depict all those different cultures.

[March 10, 2010 5:31 PM](#)

This points outwards, among other thing, to the Apocalypse, issues related to rapid development and democracy in countries like India, and the effects of history on the evolution of socio-religious dynamics. Again, the commentary is centered by the position within the

interconnected trio of blogs helps suggest the larger contexts the commentary might be pointing to.

From *Caucajewmexdian*:

Wednesday, February 24, 2010

The Death of Nasib

Gurcharan Singh Gill, my mother's father, was the second of ten children. He had one older sister, with whom he was very close, and eight younger brothers.

His sister, Naseeb, had gotten married and was teaching elementary school when she got sick. My grandpa was with the group that took her to the hospital for treatment in the middle of the night--only to be refused by the doctors because it was late, and the hospital only accepted patients during standard working hours. My grandpa saw his sister die that night before the hospital opened its doors.

Two of my first cousins have Naseeb as their middle name, as does one of my mother's cousins (who is younger than I am). Someone--my mother, my grandfather, my grandmother, or maybe one of my aunts--told me the story when I was young. It's written down in a family book as well, but

perhaps because there's still some pain attached to it to this day, it's not a story we tell often.

My mind has come back and back to it, over the years, though. As a kid, I used to imagine what sort of person Nasib, this sister my grandpa had lost, this aunt I didn't have, was. Maybe that's how I first developed the mind of a writer: by knowing there was a space I could never, in this life, fill.

I've thought about Nasib since and what her death says about the vulnerability of humanity. I think it's my awareness of that vulnerability that makes me so committed to religion: because life is delicate, I feel like we need to love and be good to each other, as Jewish, Sikh, Mormon and countless other faiths' prophets have taught.

The story of Nasib's death, maybe, has also shaped the way I think about past, present, and future. I feel like both the pain and the love that filled the past are things we need to remember. I am grateful for a present in which I've been blessed to live past twenty-five: the age when my testicular cancer would have killed me, if something else hadn't. And I want to work toward a future that is better: one in which fewer Nasibs die of treatable

conditions outside of a hospital at night, a future in which the good my family does becomes one of many ways in which Nasib is remembered.

Posted by James Goldberg at [2:44 PM](#) 

1 comments:



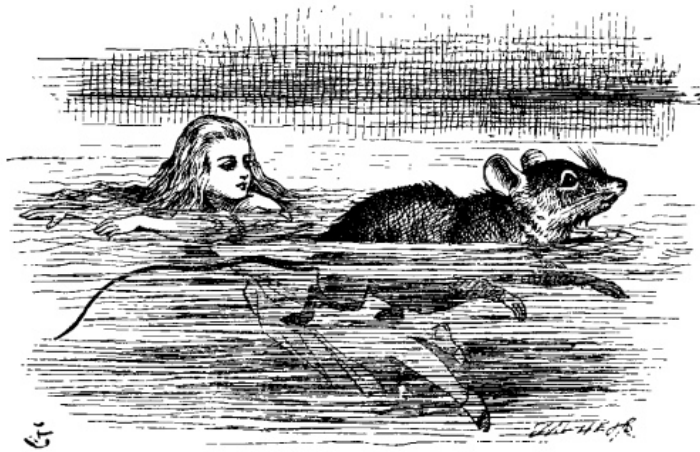
[a.k.a. Olivia](#) said...

Did you know that the house that Jasvinder and Ranjeet built, which was finished around the time that mom visited India, is named "Nasib House?" I'll have to find the photo I took of the name on the gate. I'm glad that Jasvinder (Nasib's widower) and Ranjeet (Nasib's cousin, and also Jasvinder's second wife) remember and honor her.

[February 25, 2010 5:29 AM](#)

This post is also pointing outward in numerous directions: toward the posts on universal healthcare that had just unfolded on Mormon midrashim, toward the family past and the political present, toward my evolving sense of personal aesthetics. Again, the voice of commentary is centered and gestures outward, even without hyperlinks, though the reader-directed nature of the blog context still makes it easier for the reader to let such a post serve as a navigational crossroads in their reading. If this text inspires a reader to read more, on the blogs, elsewhere on

the Internet, or even in print, I see that subsequent reading as an expansion of the borders of this text.



“Alice went on, half to herself, as she swam lazily about in the pool”

“The Mouse was swimming away from her as hard as it could go, and making quite a commotion in the pool as it went.”

Non-linear reading

Since at least the 1950s, my grandmother has been readings novels almost exclusively in the following order: beginning, end, and then, if intrigued, middle. She is hardly alone in such text-defying habits: studies have shown that even (especially?) university professors tend to skip large sections of texts as they read, as evidenced by the following block quotation:

Yadda dadda da ha yadda hadda da dooba da dahdah, yadda dadda hadda madda, in contrast, however, yadda dadda ha dadda da doobie deebie but according to yoodah doodah the case is clearly heebah deebah yaada dooah dooba daada doo, or as we learn from the Mahabharat dabba doobah kahbeep kahbeep hayya howdee hoo kachunka chunk and yadda dadda da ha yadda hadda da dooba da dahdah, yadda dadda hadda madda, which just goes to show that yadda dadda da ha yadda hadda da dooba da dahdah, yadda dadda hadda madda.

This is not, of course, to say, that linear text is dead. Linear text is alive, in good spirits but not drunk on them, and currently residing in Minnesota. I know this because he sent me a series of postcards, each one ending abruptly midsentence and thereby necessitating that the postcards be read not as separate unites, but as a sequence placed in order.

But I digress.

The point is this: that numerous blogs function primarily as giant pools of narcissistic tears should not keep us from appreciating their structural potential to invite navigation at different angles. For instance: the mouse's interests drive him one direction in one speed, while Alice's interests leave her leisurely perusing the blog in no particular direction at all.

For some discussion of this, see form one of the section: A Path! A Path! in my chapter "On Hyperlinking." Or else simply refer to the following, thoroughly skippable, block quotation:

Tuesday, July 28, 2009

[Existential Choose Your Own Adventure](#)

This book is so good, it's not even a book.

As anyone who gave up reading Choose Your Own Adventure books at the age of twelve after developing a lifelong fear of paper cuts will be glad to hear, the genre has reemerged in none other than--yes--blog form (clicking on links is so much quicker and safer than turning to page 132, then back to 71, then to 12 for the third time [it's got to be the third time because you

can see the dried blood on the page from the last two paper-wounded visits] because you're stuck in some loop and contemplating sending anthrax to the book's writer and/or publisher--which I never threatened to do as a child, unless, of course, the statute of limitations on such threats is up).

I don't know why I didn't think of using a blog to create a Choose Your Own Adventure myself--now that I've seen it done, the parallels seem so obvious. In each case, individual pieces are designed to be short and interactive. In each case, the writer frees the reader from the established hegemony of front-to-back reading by [interconnecting the posts](#) to allow readers to take their own trajectory through the work. The forms are so close, in fact, that you could improve the readability of any of the old Choose Your Own Adventure Books simply by plagiarizing it into a blog, wiki, or other digital form.

Oh, but that would be like the [Gutenberg Bible](#), a vast technological leap ahead of [preceding Bible manuscripts](#) but [virtually indistinguishable from them](#), not having yet embraced the possibilities (such as adding verse numbers and inserting commentary) that moveable type print would make possible in the later [Geneva Bible](#) and its [descendants](#).

The [author](#) of www.existentialadventure.blogspot.com is no mere Gutenberg. He is already beginning to explore the unique potential of his form, and the results are delightful. A few examples:

1) The blog looks for the implications of non-linear reading.

Traditional Choose Your Own Adventure books are still based on the concept of striving for a specific desirable end, such as getting a treasure or not dying a horrible death. This definition-by-ending reflects readers' expectations of print media.

As the title implies, however, this Existential Adventure is based on creating meaning through the journey instead. This innovation has as much to do with technology, I think, as with philosophy: in the '80s and '90s, kids accused their [nerdier classmates](#) of having read the encyclopedia--a task so improbable and boring in a world ruled by the hegemony of front-to-back that no one in their right mind would undertake it. Digital technologies have changed all that. Kids read Wikipedia today for fun, understanding that you can enter at any point and don't even have to finish a page before you click away to somewhere

else in a great and satisfying web of uncharted knowledge. I've yet to hear of someone trying to skip to the end of a blog or wiki to see where it's going before they'll commit to read it, as people still do with print.

The thrill of Existential Adventure, in accordance with its digital medium and philosophical interests, has much more to do with what you think about as you move from decision to decision and how you learn to define success than with any ending you may arrive at. Even the loops are not traps, per se, but opportunities to find meaning as Camus did in the the myth of Sisyphus. Sometimes you even want to lose yourselves in links you're fairly certain will not drive the story forward, which bring me to my next point:

2) The blog embraces the proliferation of choices possible in digital media.

The types of choices offered by traditional Choose Your Own Adventures books were often binary: do you choose this or that?, invariably action-driven: what do you want to do?, and of course, came all at once at specific turning points in the script, rather than in a perpetual stream of agency.

While Existential Adventure doesn't offer the mind-boggling array of choice available in [real life](#), it offers more kinds of choice than the traditional choose-your-own adventure. While a number of choices await you at the end of each post, smaller choices are scattered all through the prose in an unobtrusive way: objects often have their own [hyperlinks](#), so that you can, for example, stop and look at (if not smell) the [flowers](#). Sometimes such links only go to images or other simple detail; other times they reveal otherwise-hidden information and possibilities.

Some extreme choices come in a sidebar as well as constant alternatives to the more contextually-driven responses available at the end of each post. In keeping with Camus' maxim that [the only serious philosophical question is suicide](#), for example, killing yourself is always a sidebar option.

The blog also invites you to make choices about attitude and even philosophical orientation in addition to choice about physical action (one caution: I wouldn't recommend choosing determinism. If you do so, all subsequent posts will include lots of underlined options, but only with that is actually hyperlinked, presumably to reinforce your idea that choice is actually an illusion.) The meaning, again, is more in the mode than in the arc: it's about the kind of perspectives and choices you get in each

individual post more than about the "plot" you manage to build as you choose your own course through. Mode over arc, presentation over representation: the times have changed, and keep changing.

3) The blog is less predictable than a box of chocolates.

About a week after I first ran across the blog, I happened to show it to a friend who made the same choices I did--but with different results.

Further examination has convinced me that the blog is constantly being edited as well as being constantly expanded, leading to a Harry-Potter-esque uncertainty about where each metaphorical or literal staircase will lead. Editability is, after all, one of the most exciting as well as terrifying realities of the whole digital age. The world of choice and information is constantly shifting under one's feet, raising all kinds of epistemological and ontological questions.

So what will *you* choose: to hide from the implications of this new digital world and age, or, like Alice of old, to go down the Rabbit Hole that is [Existential Adventure](#).

Posted by James Goldberg at [1:09 PM](#) 

Labels: [books](#)

1 comments:



[Jimothy](#) said...

Now that I'm over my initial excitement with the piece I'm realizing that there are lots of things it doesn't do to embrace the medium. For example, you don't get to places where the story ends and you have to start writing it or anything like that--the role of the user in generating content is still limited. Maybe a switch to a wiki format could change that, but could it still keep any kind of core and uniformity?

[July 30, 2009 1:56 PM](#)



“It is wrong from beginning to end,” said the Caterpillar, decidedly; and there was silence for some minutes.

Alice said nothing: she had never been so much contradicted in all her life before, and she felt that she was losing her temper.

Workshop & Revision

In conventional university writing, revision is a process of destruction and replacement: take one of your texts, make it better, replace old with new. It’s not surprising, given this view, that many workshops focus on what needs to be “fixed” in a text—which is great when the text is a broken car, but less helpful when the text is a dog who wants to make puppies.

When I’m working in the blog form, the demand for constant new material makes me lean more towards publishing anything that looks like it might be in heat than towards keeping drafts in the garage until they are either a) perfect or b) rusted to death. While this does mean I’m guilty of subjecting my readers to texts which don’t even know the meaning of rigorous

traditional revision, it also means I get a lot of writing done and out into a world where it can mix freely (and sometimes fruitfully) with an audience.

I do go back and tinker with old blog posts occasionally, fixing spelling or adding a link I was in too much of a hurry to include the first time. I also regularly retroactively add labels to posts, which may change their content for some readers by suggesting an additional context. For the most part, though, I am like almost all bloggers in letting posts stand after I have written them.

I was a little nervous about this approach to revision, though, when asking permission to make my blogs a thesis project. Because of that fear, my original thesis proposal included a promise to do traditional revision on numerous posts. I assumed that rigorous traditional revision, so prominent in so many university models for writing, would be a minimum compromise requirement to get the blog project approved.

To my surprise, my committee members disagreed. Gideon Burton's concern was pragmatic: if you make a text available online, and someone else links to it, any unanticipated change disrupts the linker's use of the text. For purposes of online interconnection, post-publication revision is discouraged (except, of course, in texts like Wikipedia which advertise their constant evolution). John Bennion's concern was more artistic. He argued that the new medium called for a reconceptualization of revision. In jazz improvisation, said John, "revision" is primarily in responding to one's music and one's audience as the event unfolds, not rewriting afterward. Why shouldn't I be constantly re-envisioning my writing over the course of the blogs

in a similar way? Why shouldn't revision be in the way I approached the next piece rather than in the way I'd tinker with the last one?

Maybe all writers revise this way. We don't just want to fix our texts, we want to approach an idea again and again until we get it right—even if that never happens. One writer rewrites a single text a thousand and one times before publishing it. Another writer publishes a thousand and one stories which are all permutations of the same basic story, variations on a career-defining course of approach. Which is better, the car or the large pack of dogs? I suppose that all depends on who you are trying to catch...

In this chapter: four examples of paired posts which may be considered types of revisions:

Exhibit A: Two Faces of One Debate

from *Mormon Midrashim*

On March 17th, 2010, I realized that my posts from a month before and two weeks before had striking similarities. The main characters were almost the same. The argument in each was basically the same, despite the different contexts. Even the setting—Zion—appeared in both of them. Was the March 5th post a reincarnation of the February 5th one? Is reincarnation a form of revision?

You be the judge!

Here's the first:

Wednesday, February 17, 2010

What Made Adam's Language Pure?--Mos 6:

5-6

"And a book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded, in the language of Adam, for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration; And by them their children were taught to read and write, having a language which was pure and undefiled."

What made Adamic a pure language?

Drona used to say that the language of Adam differed from our languages in that each word had only one corresponding and exact meaning. In this way, both misunderstandings and puns were prevented, and that is why we call that language pure.

Teancum Singh, though, said that in Adamic each word had at least seven very different possible meanings, which everyone knew, and that when people spoke or listened to it their minds considered the spaces between each of the

possibilities, and how those spaces might enrich the possible meaning, and it is because this language was constantly enticing people to think more deeply and richly that we call it pure.

Nicole said that the language of Adam was pure only for those who wanted to understand what was said, and who spoke with care for words and for those around them, and that when Cain's language became violent and defensive, it ceased to be pure like the language of Adam. But in Zion, she said, everyone listened and spoke with care until theirs was again a pure language, and so it will be when the City of Zion is built once again before Christ comes.

Posted by James Goldberg at [8:26 AM](#) 

Labels: [Language](#)

This post got three comments, and fit in nicely with a thread on language that had a decent following. I do not recall thinking specifically about it, however, when I wrote this post:

Friday, March 5, 2010

[Homogeneity and Heterogeneity -- Mos. 7: 18](#)

"And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them." (Mos. 7: 18)

Drona used to say that to be one is to overcome and surrender our differences, that only when we do so can all our collective energy be harnessed into a single shared goal, creating the strong beats out of Zion's one heart. We should be like the red blood that pumps through the body: of one type and purpose.

But Teancum Singh used to say that most difference ought not be surrendered, but connected, woven into the whole. For as God is one, all good things are one. Zion is built up when its members connect their own insights, heritages, and gifts to the gospel, creating the different synapses that form Zion's one ever-expanding mind.

And the debate between them dances across the face of our church to this day.

Posted by James Goldberg at [6:20 PM](#) 

Although dealing with the same basic issue of singleness versus multiplicity, this post's five comments came from completely different people than commented on the earlier, strikingly similar post. This post also fit in more directly with a thread called "My Beard & BYU" on the Caucajewmexdian blog.

That my mind returned to the same core concept and produced a variation on an earlier piece of writing is, I think, a sort of revision. Does that mean that the earlier post should be deleted, hidden, or simply viewed as a step on the path to the second?

If there was a painful cost to printing, either in strained human memory, money, or dead trees, I might think so. But since publishing both online is free for me, and near-free for Blogger, why not let this one thought live two lives simultaneously, each version resonating more directly with different readers and threads?

One advantage of posting both a "rough draft" and "revision" is that the original version may still connect better for some people even if the later version works better for others.

Exhibit B: A Riff

from *Caucajewmexdian*

Here are two back-to-back posts. The second is an expansion of the principle in the first: a re-vision, if you will, of the original idea's implications. The idea is maybe similar to a jazz riff: what happens when you take one idea and then pour it into another context? Instead of bending back on itself, can revision operate sideways? Instead of cutting into a piece to find its heart, can you just see what translates when the piece walks into another room?

Here's the first piece, a long meditation on the moving gesture-at-culture my great-grandmother gave me when she taught me one Punjabi word:

Saturday, July 11, 2009

[How to Speak Punjabi Without Being Able to Carry on a Conversation](#)

Beiji--that's my great-grandmother, Basant Kaur--succeeding in teaching me one word in Punjabi: ooth. You are probably already pronouncing the "oo" correctly in your mind, it is the long "u" that also comes at the end on the word "guru" (this same long u sound, incidentally, is not the first vowel in Punjab, as Little Orphan Annie would have you believe. The beginning of Punjab ought to be pronounced like the English word "pun." The second vowel is a long a, something we might spell "ah." Try it: Punjab. Much better. Let's get back to "ooth.")

The "th" in "ooth"--and any other Indian word for that matter--is not the soft th of "this" or "that." An h after another consonant in transliterations of words from Indian languages typically means a little extra air instead. (This distinction between aspirated and unaspirated consonants is where we get words like khaki from.) So

the "th" in "ooth" is actually a breathy t which is also, as my grandmother taught me and as a textbook can explain, the kind of t pronounced when your tongue goes toward the roof of your mouth as opposed to the ones you get from putting your tongue behind your teeth. English transliterations, unfortunately, have no way of distinguishing between the two.

Now that you know, more or less, how to pronounce "ooth", I will tell you what it means.

"Ooth" means camel.

Of all the hundreds of thousands of words she could have taught me (such as the word "lakh," meaning "a hundred thousand"), I have sometimes wondered since, why did my great-grandmother so carefully teach me how to say only camel?

With the exception of things like counting to five, the names of various dishes, and a number of Sikh religious terms, my Punjabi-

language education more or less stopped after Beiji taught me "ooth" until I returned from my LDS mission, grew back my beard, and got hungry for Punjabi again. Driving across the country with my grandfather in the summer of 2005, I started to ask for this word and that, a process which culminated in a gift from my great-uncle Bachittar of my very own Punjabi alphabet book. It was a beautiful blue, with color photos and illustrations and giving a word for each letter of the alphabet, and then starting over and doing so again (more on that later).

The first letter of the Gurmukhi alphabet (invented by the Sikh gurus for the spoken Punjabi language), it turns out, is ਊ (oorhaa), the first letter in "ooth." The word and picture given as an example next to it are, in the overwhelming majority of alphabet primers and textbooks I have since laid hands on "ooth," a camel.

Beiji taught me what came first, as a directive perhaps? or simply in hope?, that I would go on to learn what followed.

Life is complicated, though, and although I can (on a good day) write things down reasonably well using the Gurmukhi alphabet, I'm not even close, four years after being given my alphabet primer, to being able to converse in Punjabi. The only formal class I took, actually, was in Punjabi's sister-language Hindi. (The Sikh teacher was a native Punjabi speaker, but Hindi is the only South Asian language even most large universities are able to offer.) I have books on my shelf now on the three overlapping languages: Punjabi (the language of my ancestors), Hindi (the language easiest to study), and Urdu (the language my grandfather found so many records in) but make slow progress, as I only find time to work with them once or twice a week for a few minutes at best.

Why bother? I may never be able to put together enough sentences to describe what I did in a single day. Why keep on my great-grandmother's mad quest for me? I live in America. What's the use of struggling with this thing called Punjabi?

At my fiancée's insistence, I started reading *Midnight's Children* recently. I knew the book was somehow about Partition and thought the title was quite clever: you see, both Pakistan and India were officially granted independence on the stroke of midnight (although thanks to time zone changes, their midnights were different). Rushdie's cleverness, however, is far from limited to the title: the work is brilliant at making oblique references to various events and ideas, of making jokes out of the slightest details. One minor character, for example, is named "The Rani of Cooch Naheen" which, as Rushdie doesn't bother to explain, translates to "The Queen of Nothing," an apt commentary on the state of Indian aristocrats at the time. A doctor's name is Sharabi, and though I can't write or speak a coherent paragraph, I know that sharab means alcohol because I learned the word once (and then heard it again in movies and CDs and in some improvised songs at a family party)--Dr. Sharabi is the one the father goes to for a prescription for alcohol after his state bans recreational alcohol.

My familiarity with north Indian languages, however, goes beyond familiarity with a few key Hindi or Punjabi words. Partition, for

example, is an English word, left, perhaps, by the Romans when they were building the wall against the Scots, but it's a word that means something much more specific in the context of India than the Romans ever could have foreseen. The English word has been cut into Punjab, bled all across it, and that I understand that is as much a part of my Punjabi as my English. (After all, Partition evokes more for me in images and emotions than in English words.)

Bhagat Singh is a name, one of have never read in a Punjabi language primer, and yet knowing the face that goes with it, and the story, associated the two words "Bhagat Singh" with the two words "Inquilab Zindabad" (Long Live the Revolution) and the single word Shaheed (Martyr).

I also understand why it's funny (and what it implies) when a family in the film *Kal Ho Na Ho* explains why they named two sons Bhagat Singh by saying "There are two films--why not two boys?" (Knowing certain stereotypes ought to be part of learning language.)

I may not be able to put together nouns and verbs properly to order food in a restaurant, but I know the names of the dishes as words that are neither English nor Punjabi, but rather the multi-lingual

proper names for certain kinds of food.

What I am trying to say is that there is more than being able to assemble sentences to knowing a language. That because a language, like [Kira's India](#), is a complicated system of associations, studying a language yields benefits other than those that come only with a rudimentary mastery of grammar.

The journey Beiji launched me on when she taught me how to say camel is serving and will continue to serve to bind me closer to her and her home, will help create me far after the moment of my birth, though I will never learn how to speak the way my grandfather's grandson would have if he had stayed in the continent of his origin, if [he had not followed](#) a set of strange pulls and peculiar hopes.

Posted by James Goldberg at [11:35 AM](#) 

My re-vision of this piece came after literally looking at the original again. I realized then that my grandfather had only gestured at Jewish tradition in much the same way that my great-grandmother had only been able to gesture at Punjabi tradition. My literal re-vision gave me new in-sight, and I wrote another post:

Tuesday, July 14, 2009

Another Ooth

It has occurred to me, in the days since writing about [the word my mother's grandmother taught me](#), that the Hanukkah menorah my father's father gave to my parents was another kind of gateway. It was a beautiful thing: instead of a narrow stem dividing into nine branches, the solid base rose up into the image of a metallic lion above whom rested symbols of each tribe of Israel, and further up over them, room for the candles we'd light each year and watch until they burned down to nothing but a final tiny ascending plume of smoke. All year long the menorah stood out in our living room, a reminder of those winter nights filled with more than the usual stories and meaning. All year long the menorah stood out in our living room, and helped the faith of my ancestors grow into my own developing sense of faithfulness. Yes, like the miraculous oil it commemorates, that menorah served well in a transitional period, keeping alive a spark that can become a bridge from future to past and past to future if we choose to walk it.



Photo by [Vilo Elisabeth Westwood](#)

(If you look very closely, you will notice that the photo-within-a-photo in the bottom right corner features Judith and the Menorah.)

Posted by James Goldberg at [11:09 AM](#) 

I could do traditional revision on both posts. I could revise both posts into a longer single essay. But I don't think any of that should have to happen before I'm able to acknowledge the truer revision of seeing in my grandfather what I'd seen in my great-grandmother three days before.

Exhibit C: Improvement

from *My Life and Hard Times*

In August, I decided to share the idea of a *Vampioneers* series with the world via my blog. I wrote a post called “Vampioneers 1: The Everlasting Covenant” in the same understated tone I’d used to announce *Menachem Bloodaxe: Lost Legend of a Jewish Viking* earlier.

Here is the post. I’ve included the comments:

Tuesday, August 25, 2009

[Vampioneers 1: The Everlasting Covenant](#)

Was visiting some friends last week and noticed, nestled between Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series and Gerald Lund's *The Work and the Glory* saga, a book I'd never heard of before. I guess it's the first of an still-unfinished trilogy about some Welsh vampires who join the early LDS church.

I was torn between a dismissive impulse and a morbid curiosity...in my life, morbid curiosity typically trumps condescension, so I borrowed it. I've been surprised: the book so far is actually quite good. The missionaries haven't shown up yet, though, do it might get corny yet (so far all that's really happened is that the village priest is noticing something's weird in the town, and the vampires are getting nervous because apparently his grandfather came pretty close to killing them. Got a cool building/foreboding feel at this point.)

Anyway, I'll let you know if it stays good. Otherwise, consider this post notification that the world is already weirder and writers are already more desperate for attention than you probably previously thought.

Posted by James Goldberg at [11:10 PM](#) 

Labels: [books](#)

2 comments:



[Elisa](#) said...

NO! I can't believe someone else got to it first. I guess we'll have to write a novella about a viking village that is overrun by cannibals.

Cannings? Vikibals? It just doesn't roll off the tongue like

Vampioneers...

[August 26, 2009 7:59 AM](#) 



[Bonnie](#) said...

I'm not sure the world could actually be weirder than I previously thought.

[August 27, 2009 6:23 AM](#) 

The same tone that had, I felt, worked for a tenth century Jewish Viking didn't work as well for me or my readers at promoting nineteenth-century Mormon vampires. I'd meant to keep the thread going, posting periodic updates as I "read" the book, but I felt trapped by the understated tone I'd set for myself and didn't go back.

In November, though, my cousin Jazon, who had both read the previous post and discussed *Vampireeers* in person with me, made a movie poster for *Vampireeers: The Everlasting Covenant*. He suggested I blog about the series again using his image. The boldness of the image inspired me to try a more energetic, effusive tone in my post "New Moon Rising":

Friday, November 20, 2009

[New Moon Rising](#)

I love Stephenie Meyer for many reasons. I love that she's Mormon. I love her because she wrote books about not having casual sex and made millions of dollars in the process. I love her because her books are black and white and red all over. I love her because the last line of the last full paragraph on page 197 of *Twilight* ("It was a colossal tribute to his face that it kept my eyes away from his body") gave my cousin Jazon a new fitness goal: to work out until it's a tribute to his chiseled body that it distracts from his perfect face. Clearly, this is

literature that changes lives. And I love Stephenie Meyer for that.

Do her books have shortcomings? Sure. There's a missing comma on page 67 of *New Moon*, for example. Her dialogue is often coated with a distracting number of adjectives and adverbs. And the way her books progressively romanticize controlling types and stalkers is a little bit alarming. But they can be forgiven all that, because they've inspired something better:



Vampioneers: The Everlasting Covenant is the fifth-best book I've ever read, and I've read a lot of books. It takes all the angst and turmoil of *Twilight* and moves it from the adolescent to the transcendent. These vampires aren't tortured by forbidden love for

a whiny teenage girl; they are tortured by the way their immortality and changed natures are separating them from God. They don't spend their time staring through girls' windows; they rescue strangers from another continent from a midnight mob, embrace a new faith, cross an ocean, and help a prophet build a city as persecution rages.

And now, they'll be in a movie. That's right: at select screenings of *New Moon* in the intermountain west, they've started playing previews for what will almost certainly be the film of the decade. The *Twilight* film franchise, as you know, is nearing its eclipse.

So, move over Meyer media machine. The [real](#) new moon rising is *Vampioneers*.

Posted by James Goldberg at [12:21 PM](#) 


Labels: [Movies](#)

7 comments:



[Rachel](#) said...

Yes, yes, yes! You are the best!

[November 20, 2009 5:38 PM](#) 



[a.k.a. Olivia](#) said...

did you see the Havard Lampoon's response to Twilight?

Nightlight: <http://news.softpedia.com/news/Harvard-University-Releases-Twilight-Parody-122718.shtml>

You better hurry up before the spotlight fades!

[November 20, 2009 7:17 PM](#) 

Anonymous said...

You are amazing! Did you create the movie poster, as well?

Nate

[November 21, 2009 11:25 AM](#) 



[James Goldberg](#) said...

The poster is by Rajput Productions. I'm an advisor to the company, but don't really do any of the work.

[November 21, 2009 4:29 PM](#) 



[Lobbie](#) said...

Wait is this actually going to be a movie? Or is it just a poster parody?

[November 22, 2009 12:20 PM](#) 



[James Goldberg](#) said...

It is most certainly not a parody. Parodies are almost universally inferior to the original work being parodied, because their only goal is to make fun of it. Too many parodies lack their own, independent heart.

Vampire Weekend is all heart--no, all soul. It is not a caricature of another work; it is a epic work of passion, beauty, violence, doubt, and the journey toward exaltation. Who ever heard of an epic parody that gets at the core of the human experience?


While Vampire Weekend clearly owes a certain creative debt to Twilight, its purpose is to redeem rather than ridicule the original creation. It is far, far more than a poster parody.

[November 23, 2009 11:35 AM](#) 



[Dad](#) said...

You need to get Joss Whedon and Gerald Lund to collaborate on this!

[November 29, 2009 8:54 PM](#) 

It's hard to tell exactly how many people read a given entry, since many do so from the main blog pages, but 176 readers have visited the "New Moon Rising" page, whereas only 51 have visited the "Vampireers 1: The Everlasting Covenant" page. In terms of number of readers and enthusiasm of comments as well as my own personal judgment, the latter post seems clearer superior to the earlier version.

As this case illustrates, one clear advantage of sometimes publishing a subpar "rough draft" is that a reader can become a collaborator and catalyst for the "revision." Another advantage to publishing both a "rough draft" and "revision" is that you can see—without the biases of a workshop environment—the difference in audience reaction between the two.

Exhibit D: Two Approaches

from *My Life and Hard Times*

All of my blogs turn periodically to the political. Perhaps because *My Life and Hard Times* specializes in questioning basic assumptions and providing a tilted, slightly subversive view of reality, it turns to the political quite often.

In January, someone had complained (in real life) to me for the umpteenth time about America's lack of a strong third party. Instead of explaining, for the umpteenth time, the mathematics of why parliamentary systems, where seats are based on vote percentages, tend to have multiple parties while the U.S. system, where seats are based in local majorities, resists more than two parties, I wrote a post called "The NoMass Party" comically raising the issue of local majority:

Wednesday, January 27, 2010

[The NoMass Party](#)

For those of you who hate the news, this blog brings an important update: Republican Scott Brown recent(-ish)ly won a special election for the Senate seat vacated by Ted Kennedy's death. This was a huge setback for Democrats, many of whom are reported to have "cried like colicky babies" because the loss of this one seat robs their party of its sixty-seat Senate "supermajority."

This, as it turns out, is a big deal, because as a democracy, the

United States' official position on minorities that constitute less than 40% of the elected population is "Sorry, suckas." Brown's victory has upset the balance of power by shifting Republicans from "suckas" to the strong minority block needed to keep a filibuster on the floor, thus bringing Democrats' plans to a halt (which is, quite frankly, where the party's plans spend most of their time anyway--but I digress).

People whose salaries are paid by the Democratic Party aren't the only ones upset by the victory, though.

"It's definitely time for a change" says Vermont resident Walt Thompson. "I'm worried about how our country will turn out if Massachusetts keeps wielding so much power--have you ever seen how Boston is run?"

Thompson is not alone in his concern. A recent survey indicates that 38% percent of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine residents are "seriously ticked" that their neighbor to the south has taken the limelight once again, and that an additional 17% are "moderately pissed off."

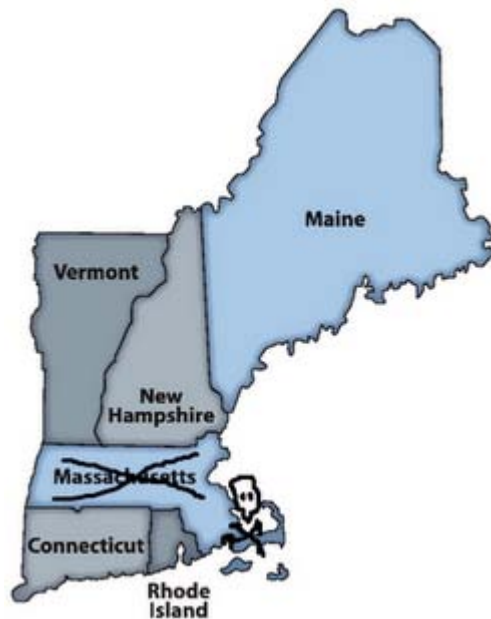


Channeling the rage: Emily Belanger

That's where activist Emily Belanger comes in. She's the brains behind the newly-minted NoMass Party, which she claims will be the first viable third party in America in over a century. "The problem with recent attempts to form third parties" says Belanger, "is that they all try so hard to have a national appeal. What good is that? Even if you get 5% of the vote nationwide, that's still zero seats."

Belanger's plan for the NoMass Party is to focus exclusively on five

small, independent-minded New England States: New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Assuming roughly equal votes for Republicans and Democrats, the NoMass Party will need only 40% of votes in each voting district to secure the region's 10 Senate seats and 12 seats in the House of Representatives. This seems particularly possible, since the area already has a strong history of electing independents--according to Belanger, talks with Joe Lieberman (I, CN) and Bernie Sanders (I, VT) about joining the NoMass Party are already underway.



The NoMass Party's core electoral strategy focuses on five states.

Is Belanger's plan viable? We checked with [Ramesh Chatterjee](#) of Rajput University to find out. He supplied us with the following numerical breakdown of the possible road ahead for the NoMass Party:

7.7 million residents in the five target states

2.3 million likely voters in the 2010 elections in the target region

900,000 votes needed to secure the 40% which is likely to seal across-the-board victories

=**0.3%** of the U.S. population's support needed to win 10% of the Senate and 12 key House seats for NoMass.

What would the NoMass Party do with 10 Senate and 12 House seats?

"We'd be the most powerful party in the country" says Belanger, with an offhanded sort of confidence. "Republicans and Democrats are famously unable to agree on anything. We'd be the dealmakers, offering our deciding votes for one party on one issue then the other on another in exchange for their support on some of our core issues. We won't pick favorites. In each case, the party willing to offer our

constituents the greatest concessions will win."

All this sounds great for the party's planned 900,000 supporters in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, and Rhode Island-- but what about the rest of the country? "Losers can't be choosers" says Belanger, "but I think they'll be better off after NoMass moves the center of political power back out of Massachusetts."

"After all," she adds, "have you seen how they run things in Boston?"

Posted by James Goldberg at [11:27 AM](#) 

Labels: [News](#)

In March, my longtime interest in the mathematics of democracy came up in a conversation with my wife. This became the basis for a second thought-experiment about the mathematics of representation:

Wednesday, March 3, 2010

[Campaign Finance Reform](#)

The country of Kahanistan recently adopted a new constitution, much like ours but with one noteworthy exception: because

Kahanistan has far too many states to make a Senate practical, their bicameral legislature is composed of a "House of Experts" and a "House of the People" instead.

The members of the "House of Experts" are elected representatives who, like members of our own House of Representatives, have staffs to do much of their research and bill drafting while they spend most of their time worrying about fundraising for expensive media-driven election campaigns to make sure their staffs get re-elected. This House is expected to work out many of the details of legislation.

The second house, the "House of the People" operates something like a lawmaking focus group. Members of this House do not and cannot seek election: they are selected randomly from out of the census records (with an international team of computer scientists and statisticians observing and confirming the randomness of the selection process) and invited to join the House for a term. Thus, the House of the People routinely includes numerous members drawn from the ranks of Kahanistan's stay-at-home mothers along with garbage men, advertising copy writers, nurses, public school

teachers, college students, small businessmen and women, grandparents, retirees, the unemployed, and generally at least one or two prisoners (who participate through video conference). All legislation which comes out of the House of Experts is subsequently examined, debated, and then accepted or rejected by the House of the People. The members of the House of the People also talk amongst themselves about the nation's problems and occasionally create detailed mandates for the House of Experts to write legislation on this or that issue, keeping this or that in mind.

Kahanistan claims, through this system, to be the world's only true democracy--a bold claim for an imaginary country, to be sure, but one which the innovative system of government nevertheless justifies.

Could the U.S. ever adopt a system like Kahanistan's?

It may be that a measure as radical as selecting one democratic legislative body without campaigns and elections would be the only successful means of enacting effective campaign finance reform.

Posted by James Goldberg at [9:59 AM](#) 

I see this also as a form of revision, one in which an issue exerts a certain persistent gravity on the writer's mind. Depending upon where I am in the flow of my life's conversation, I approach the issue differently. I will be surprised if I do not turn to it once again.

What if the drafts of a piece are sometimes a form of triangulation? My goal, when writing about the mathematics of representation, should perhaps not be to create the definitive James Goldberg statement on the subject, but rather, over the years, to mark out the space in which I've danced around the issue's core. If I rejected old articulations in favor of new ones, would that serve more to illuminate the issue, or to allow potential illumination to escape?

Closing Statement

The Byrds once wisely sang: to every thing, turn turn turn. There is a season, turn turn turn. And so on. In the spirit of their plagiarized wisdom, I would like to conclude this chapter by saying that the standard academic model for revision is useful and powerful in many contexts. There are numerous occasions in which it makes sense to go over a text and improve it, replacing the old with the new.

It's certainly not the only possible mode of revision, however, as I hope Exhibits A-D (and sometimes Y) have shown. Different people are constantly revising in a wide variety of ways.

Michel du Montaigne, for example, revised by inserting new layers of thought in successive editions of old texts rather than by reworking specific sentences, or fighting for

concision (a word which was probably not understood by most writers until sometime in the twentieth century). Wynton Marsalis revises as he plays, feeling out what might fit the moment, reimagining where a performance can go within the frame he's set for it. Revision for him, I'd imagine, has less to do with fixing than learning new ways to feel. When blogging, I experience re-vision in a variety of ways, whether it's in revisiting an issue, responding to an audience reaction, or recasting the core of one post in another context. There ought to be room in the realm of revision to account for Montaigne, Marsalis, and Me. And perhaps by extension, dear reader, for you.

Particularly as new media composition becomes more influential in cultural, critical, and creative discourse, it's important for us to explore ideas about what, in another medium, central composition concepts like revision ought to be allowed to mean. We need to re-envision the range of revision.



“I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!”

“Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,’ thought Alice; ‘but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!”

Author’s note: Try me! Selected links in this chapter are clickable (if not entirely authentic due to library regulations nixing external hyperlinks).

On Hyperlinking

The Cheshire Cat is at once charming and terrifying. He is like Jesus in his godlike power over space, time, and even [death](#), and perhaps most of all, in his insistence on the madness of the world.

Perhaps because I was raised with the insane idea that more people should try to be like Jesus (a man who tosses over the altars to the sacred dollar in the temple, who can’t always be bothered to obey what are commonly accepted as the laws of physics, who speaks across traditionally-inviolable ethnic and gender lines casually at wells), I have long felt myself drawn to the Cheshire Cat. What would it be like to move as he does? What if you could pass through walls, or leave a grin in one place even after you’ve gone?

Hyperlinks are used, in most texts, in a fairly straightforward way. The word or phrase in the text which serves as their entrance is typically designed to tell you exactly what to expect from their exit. Such hyperlinks allow a reader who knows where she wants to go and where she doesn't to navigate a textual web with great ease.

But what about the reader who, like Alice, doesn't much care where she goes? How can a writer use hyperlinks to help her get *there*?

In this chapter, a few thoughts on possible creative uses of the hyperlink:

Form One: A Path! A Path!

One of Stephen Tuttle's many nightmares goes like this: at some point in the future, he turns on his computer to read the news or consult a dictionary online only to find that *every word* is hyperlinked to its own definition! Whenever he has this dream, he wakes in a cold sweat after the third time he clicks on an instance of the word "and."

Because of this recurring nightmare, Dr. Tuttle experiences mild anxiety whenever he visits Wikipedia. He doesn't dare count and graph the number of links per article he sees month to month because he has a sneaking suspicion the number is rising. Dr. Tuttle misses the days when it simply went assumed that a reader might look up a word for more context at will using, say, a printed dictionary. He finds the underlining and bright blues of hyperlinks unsightly, as if the words were advertising their readiness to prostitute themselves below the neon lights of a red district.

As I listen to Dr. Tuttle's nightmares and lifemares, I am filled with empathy and compassion. I, too, go to Wikipedia to mourn our post-post-modern loss of purity and innocence. But then I realize: these links are not simply to dead-end definitions. The links lead, inevitably, to other links, which lead to yet other links, which ultimately lead to a scanned copy of Borges' short story "The Library of Babel."

As I follow link to link, I begin to realize how much of the Internet is connected. I am fascinated by this, especially when I discover a link to my own chapter on [nonlinear reading](#). I begin to have dreams like Dr. Tuttle's, only in mine each word opens up into a vast labyrinth in which lovers have met, wars been waged, old means' beards filled with tears.

I enter the [Wikipedia olympics](#).

I begin to think of the Internet as an [existential adventure](#).

And I begin to write as if hyperlinks transform my blogs from flat pages into origami: each allowing the reader to construct a certain folding of the text, to bring this point and that point together, to see how page fifty-one leads not only to page fifty-two, but also to page five, twelve, one-hundred-sixteen.

Form Two: Irony and Easter Eggs

A joke, in its most basic form, is an act of bioelectric engineering which results in the formation of a new mental hyperlink. The purpose of a joke's verbal structure is to call up one set of associations in the brain, on to refer back to those associations in a novel, unexpected way later. You hear jokes forward, but it is only because your memory also links each new phrase

backward that the joke is ever funny. Most successful jokes create an expectation, leave space for the expectation to rise, and then twist the expectation (see, for example, the first two sentences in the blog post below).

Because hyperlinks have to create some sort of expectation in order to motivate anyone to click them, ironic use of hyperlinks fits the general formula for humor, as demonstrated by the phrase “fans of Saparmurat Niyazov” below.

Monday, February 22, 2010

[Economic Sanctions: An Afterthought](#)

I think one reason the United States overuses economic sanctions is that they can be highly effective against countries where the government is controlled by businesses.

Unfortunately, not every country is like ours in that way. Some countries, for example, are controlled by [Michael Jackson fans](#) instead. Others were controlled for years by [fans of Saparmurat Niyazov](#).

I will offer the same advice to top U.S. policy-setters as is given to husbands and wives in hundreds of *New York Times* best-selling pop psychology books: not everyone thinks like you. Deal with it.

Posted by James Goldberg at [8:38 AM](#)

Form Three: Imperialist Hyperlinks

Let us return, for a moment, to Dr. Tuttle's nightmare. Or rather, to the subject of his nightmare. You will recall that in the nightmare, the relationship between the words on one end of the hyperlink stand in a relationship of rough equivalence to the definitions on the other end of the hyperlink, definitions which the original words, presumably, do not, cannot, and would not want to change.

Imagine a world, however, in which the hyperlink's entrance has imperial designs on the content at the hyperlink's exit: a world, so to speak, in which every sentence wants to somehow colonize and bend the definitions of its hyperlinked words. Maybe all the would-be imperialist post of origin wants to do is transform the content on the other end from expository to amusing. Or maybe it has more sinister plans.

For argument's sake, let's suppose that the would-be imperialist hyperlinking post is called Russia and looks something like this:

Tuesday, July 7, 2009

[Russia](#)

Russia is the country of Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitzyn, and countless other brilliant, soul-filled writers with hard to spell names. It is also the country of the Siberian tiger, of famous bears, and of at least [nine native breeds of pig](#). And yet Americans still tend to overwhelmingly associate Russia with the Cold War

(probably more because Russia is so famously cold than because of the prominent Russian involvement in that famous conflict).

It is time that our country move on from such simplistic understanding of former Governor Palin's next-door neighbor. We need to learn to see their most famous current political leader less as the Chechen Destroyer of [fishing-picture fame](#) (who optimistic bookies are still hoping to get into a match with [California's Governator](#)), and more as a kind and gentle man with a [soft spot for kittens](#). We need to learn more Russian geography, about this country that stretches from [sea](#) to [sea](#) to [sea](#) to [shining, frozen sea](#), and about its great cultural regions, like the [Jewish Autonomous Oblast](#) (a lesser-known destination for Yiddish language enthusiasts, snuggled sweetly on the border with China). We need to understand Russians as a people more interested in our first lady's [gardening than in her clothes](#), and Russian schools as places where it's a good idea for an American President to occasionally [give a commencement address](#).

And maybe, if we do, Russians will start to understand us, not simply as rivals, or as the home country of Coca-Cola and

McDonald's, or as exporters of shallow and mindless materialism,
but as...um...er...yeah.

I'll have to get back to you on that.

Posted by James Goldberg at [12:39 PM](#) 

In this post, the repurposing of hyperlinked content seldom goes further than making Russia's nine native breeds of pig into a laughing matter (something which they are ordinarily most certainly not). And yet the post presents intriguing possibility: for example, that of systematically subverting the news industry, piece by piece, simply by the way in which one links to it. Or: making the Jewish Old Testament into a clearly Christian document, the way Matthew's hyperlinks do.

Form Four: The Link that Lies

To assume that a hyperlink only functions in the actual digital transportation that follows a click is to misunderstand the hyperlink's role in new media. Because digital literacy is guided by reader choice, readers quickly learn a) that they have no obligation whatsoever to click on everything and b) that every choice means something whether it is clicked on or not.

That is to say: before it is ever clicked, the hyperlink carries a certain promise, an ethos of reality and of possible additional experience. If I were to write "I'm not going to miss next week's [Elvis Costello concert](#)," even the reader with no interest in Elvis Costello would be

aware that my text leads, in some way, toward a fuller experience of Elvis Costello, and that I, by extension, in somehow grounded in additional linkable experience. The reader who loves Elvis Costello will have a still richer experience. As his hand moves the mouse, he may wonder if he is about to be transported to website of Costello himself, perhaps to a page dedicated to the concert in question. As the mouse's cursor glides toward the link, the reader may wonder whether the link, fortuitously, will lead directly to Ticketmaster instead, where yet another link will invite him to share his credit card number, and yet another will allow him to finalize a transaction which in turn leads to a literal, physical transportation to the literal, physical space of the Elvis Costello concert the reader and I will share. As the cursor hangs above the hyperlinked word, the reader's mind charged with anticipation, it may occur to him that the link might actually lead to a previous blog post of mine, in which I masterfully manipulate letters and symbols to express the very visceral sense in which I am salivating in anticipation of this Elvis Costello concert. In this moment, the reader will realize that it is not only the prospect of drawing closer to Elvis Costello this link entices him with, it is also the possibility of drawing closer, through Elvis Costello, to me, and through me back to Elvis Costello, until the three of us form some sort of mystical Trinity. Such is the power of the hyperlink before it is even clicked!

Imagine, then, that instead of writing "I'm not going to miss next week's [Elvis Costello concert](#)," I wrote, "I'm not going to miss next week's [Elvis Presley concert](#)." Because readers are conditioned to expect additional experience and authority wherever they see a hyperlink, such a sentence would likely jar most readers.

Such is the power of the dishonest hyperlink.

Here's one that fooled a least one reader:

Thursday, July 9, 2009

Peak Oil: A Love Story

This is one of the most innovative independent film projects I've seen in years. Imagine [*The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil*](#) meets [*The Decalogue*](#) meets [*Dil Se*](#) and you're halfway to imagining [*Peak Oil: A Love Story*](#).

The premise is timely and intriguing...how would the world react if (when?) the energy sources we rely on suddenly stopped being sufficient for our needs? A collection of seven scenes, each depicting a unique story, ranging in length from three to thirty minutes each, take us on the journey. In an intriguing twist, the scenes have Urdu names representing the various "stages of love" from the first meeting of eyes on to all-consuming passion. The way the stages go was probably a much better fit for desperate, unapproved love in rigid medieval societies than for describing healthy, modern romantic relationships, but it does very well at capturing the stages of human response to this imagined (and future?) crisis, going from the first recognition that things have happened that will change life

forever through the progressively radical responses.

I won't give away the whole film's plot(s), but do want to put in a plug for Ibaadat, the fifth scene, which features Mormons! Maybe I'm just biased, but I think the scene is also the prettiest...in it, Mormons have activated their lay church organization and old communal economics to make things work. The romance that develops between a convert's daughter and the bishop's son is subtle and sweet, but it's the backgrounds that are the most engrossing. The piece is set in what used to be a suburb, so there are all these vaguely familiar-looking houses, but their yards have been consecrated to the ward and converted into fields that the different quorums and stuff take care of, so the streets are just bursting with life. I don't think I'll ever be able to look at my own street again quite the same way having seen the way people use the land in the film (especially since it follows scenes where people are not doing nearly as well with the adjustment. Brrr!)

Anyway, I highly recommend this movie to anyone who's thought deeply about what the future may hold and doesn't mind sitting through some scary stuff to get to the hopeful parts. (I suppose,

after all, that sitting through the scary to get to the hopeful is a pretty accurate description of much of life...) If you see the film, be sure to let me know what you think.

Posted by James Goldberg at 12:53 PM 

Labels: Movies

2 comments:



Davey Morrison said...

Where did you see this? Also, kudos on seeing The Decalogue, one of the most amazing things ever.

July 24, 2009 5:02 AM



[Jimothy](#) said...

That's actually something I've been meaning to write about. There's this tiny film festival in (of all places) Orderville, UT, dedicated to films about pressing socio-ecological issues.

Most of the stuff was absolute crap and dashed my high hopes about the festival's lofty goals. (In defense of the organizers, it

probably is hard to get the cream of the crop to rural southern Utah). BUT Peak Oil: A Love Story was incredible, and a few other films had intriguing ideas if not the same level of artistic execution.

You should definitely check it out...I think it's every other year, though, so you'll have to be patient.

[July 24, 2009 11:49 AM](#)

In this post is one that fooled my wife (a woman who is not easily fooled). Can you guess which link is the lie without clicking?

Saturday, September 5, 2009

[I read the news today oh boy](#)

If by "today" you mean "last week" then yes, I read the news. A few highlights:

The Necktie: An Energy Vampire



Sheik Hasina has no patience
for impracticality

Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, is fed up with men wasting all the electricity. She [recently ordered](#) all government employess to stop wearing ties and suit jackets and to leave their shirts untucked in an effort to decrease cooling costs in government buildings. Analysts are hoping that private sector businesses will follow the government's examples and that a "Just Say No to Ties" program will help ease Bangladesh's energy shortage woes.

The Jolly Green Giants, a U.S. environmentalist advocacy group, is pushing for similiar measures in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and throughout the southern states. If we don't act sooner, spokesperson Bruce Banner warns, the day may come when video

game time is "rationed like sugar during World War Two. Which would you rather give up--a tie now or your Wii time later?"

A White Flag in Academia

When Larry Sanger [proposed the idea](#) of incorporating a wiki element as a feeder into the academically-oriented (now defunct) Nupedia project, objections were so strong that the project had to be split off under a separate domain name lest it taint the Nupedia project by association. Academics and educators have remained predominantly critical of the project in the intervening years, even as the number of Wikipedia articles and readers has multiplied into the millions and Wikipedia has risen to the top of Google's search results on most subjects.



Dr. Chatterjee wants to end the war between traditional academics and Web 2.0 models for sharing knowledge. Sheikh Hasina thinks he should take off his tie & jacket first.

Ramesh Chatterjee, President of [Rajput University](#), is looking to change that. He recently approved a change in campus policy that requires professors to spend at least one hour per week editing Wikipedia. "We've been warning students against this long enough" he said in his subsequent message to the faculty. "The idea of a hypertext-based universal encyclopedia is so powerful, they will continue to turn to it first for information. It's time we did our part

to ensure that the formal and informal students of the world get the best possible information at the place of their choice." Academic Vice President Sayed Multan added "If enough institutions follow our lead, significant portions of Wikipedia will become de facto peer-reviewed. We can also increase the number of references to premier journals and research in our respective fields, showing their role in the formation of human knowledge."

The change is not without critics, however. In addition to classical concerns about the value of creating a strong dividing line between academic and popular knowledge, some have expressed concerns about the future repercussions of institutions paying employees to edit the open encyclopedia. "Any institution paying employees to edit the world's most popular reference work is effectively buying influence" says democracy advocate Tom Lin. "Are we really comfortable with putting our view of the world up for sale?"

Posted by James Goldberg at [10:24 AM](#) 

Labels: [News](#)

Form-al Conclusion:

Much as there are many flavors of yogurt, there are many flavors of hyperlink. For example: strawberry-banana, path-making, lemon, ironic, vanilla, imperialist, mixed berry, and dishonest. Hyperlinks have important applications in our literature; yogurt has important applications in culture. Or perhaps it is the other way around.



“Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!”

Audience and Time

Ed Vaughan, one of my acting professors at Otterbein College, used to say that theatre does not happen on stage: it happens somewhere in the air above the audience, where audience memories are interacting with the narrative. Let us suppose that Ed is more or less right and that, by extension, all literature lives less in the text than between the audience and the text.

Now let us imagine an audience made up primarily of people who are constantly as rushed as the White Rabbit.

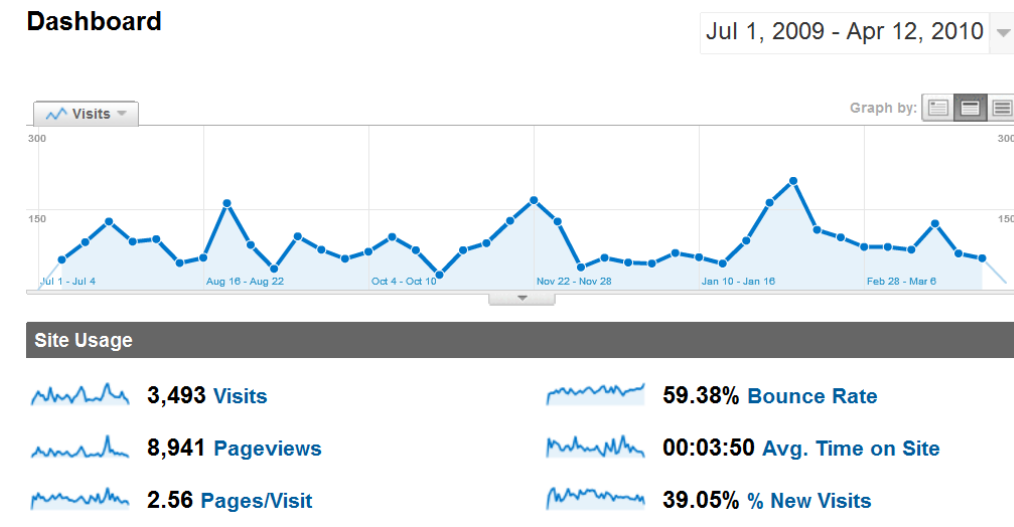
Contemporary writers spend significant time and energy considering the shape and structure of their texts—postmodern experimentation, perhaps, has made us unusually aware of the range of choice we may have in such matters.

Can we also envision multiple shapes of audience interaction and time? Can we embrace the multitude of implicit opportunities such shapes present?

I am excited by the idea that in any given month, a few hundred people are willing to give my blogs three to four minutes of their attention at a time. Many of these readers return several times a week to the blog: each subsequent encounter, then, brings my new writing into contact with their new days' context and experience. Or else: the blog sticks in the back of readers' minds and its interaction with their experience creates art in the times between their readings.

In this chapter, I refer to the most basic information provided by Google Analytics to propose four different shapes of audience-blog interaction from my blogs' experience. In each case, the main graphs show the number of visits to the blog in question per week since I installed Google Analytics.

Two Possibilities from *My Life and Hard Times*



Possibility 1: Habit/Addiction

Dry spells in the rhythm of posting invariably decrease readership, but despite several periods of neglect, *My Life and Hard Times* has only fallen below fifty visits a week twice. That consistency in readership, plus the relatively low “New Visits” percentage, suggest to me a certain pattern of regularity. That is: a significant number of readers have made this blog part of their weekly or even daily routine. At least some of these readers, however, appear to be more than habitual readers. When I haven’t posted in a while, they go back and read in the archives. They comment on old pieces. A few have even emailed me telling me I really should write more often.

While my blog’s quirky nature may keep it from being absolutely viral (quickly winning new readers who are quick to recommend the blog to yet more new readers), the work has found at least some people who can love its taste, if not always share it with others.

Possibility 2: Social Reading

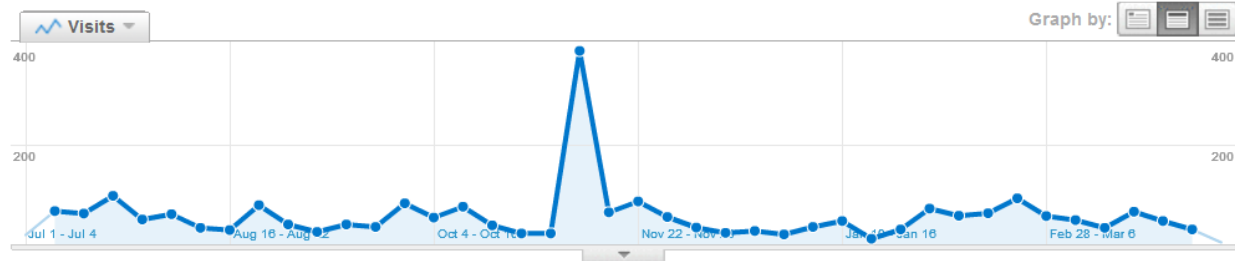
Most of the spikes in readership correspond with posts I linked to on Facebook. In the case of the highest spike (during the communist takeover), the correspondence is with multiple people posting links on Facebook. In these cases, the reader-blog relationship is not a traditional author-reader relationship per se: it's a relationship between people who happen, for a moment, to take on roles like "writer" and "reader." Readers participate in a social space rather than in a more purely literary space.

The types of posts which draw large audiences via Facebook tend to be about subjects of broad public concern, ranging from the more local issue of Kathy Cowley's fate to the international issue of *Twilight*.

One Possibility from *Mormon Midrashim*

Dashboard

Jul 1, 2009 - Apr 12, 2010 ▾



Site Usage



2,330 Visits



64.33% Bounce Rate



5,086 Pageviews



00:02:54 Avg. Time on Site



2.18 Pages/Visit



57.85% % New Visits

Possibility 3: Drive-By Reading

Mormon Midrashim averages about fifty visits per week. In the week of Nov. 8-14, one of my posts was linked to by the popular blog *Times and Seasons* and subsequently featured in the “Bloggernacle Backbench” column of the *Mormon Times*. That week, the blog got 391 visits instead.

Here is the post everyone read:

Monday, November 9, 2009

[Walking to Church D&C 61: 3-4, 15](#)

"But verily I say unto you, that it is not needful for this whole company of mine elders to be moving swiftly upon the waters, whilst the inhabitants

on either side are perishing in unbelief.

Nevertheless, I suffered it that ye might bear record; behold, there are many dangers upon the waters, and more especially hereafter . . .

Wherefore, the days will come that no flesh shall be safe upon the waters."

My family and I live in Utah Valley, which means that we're almost always within walking distance of a church. Theoretically speaking, so is almost everyone else--but that doesn't keep the buildings from needing very large parking lots. Why do so many people drive to churches that are only a few blocks away?

This Sunday we were running late, and it was awfully tempting to just drive. Cars' convenience is addictive that way: the possibility of speed tends to seduce us when we're in a hurry. We decided not to risk getting any more addicted to the car than we already are though and walked instead, even though we'd be late.

I'm glad we did. [Kira](#), our five-year-old, got to hear the leaves crunch under her feet. We stepped in and out of each other's shadows. We could feel air on our faces and the ground under our feet. This is a worthwhile part, I thought, of raising our child as a daughter of God: spending time on

Sabbath mornings with her in the world God made.

We need to learn to not always rush when there is so much to be learned and done [walking](#).

Maybe this is part of the Lord's warning to his servants in early Restoration days against travel on the water. He couldn't warn them about cars and have them understand, so he tried to teach them that acceleration often includes isolation instead. That always speeding to somewhere else means forgetting where you are.

Does Satan ride today less on the river than on the interstates--or even right here on the Internet?

Posted by James Goldberg at [5:14 PM](#) 

Labels: [DC](#)

I don't check the analytics daily, so my first indication that anything was unusual was from the unexpected tone in the comments. Usually, my readers are fairly respectful and the comments, while sometimes engaging social or sociological issues, are overwhelmingly religious. Not so in the early reader comments here:

9 comments:

Anonymous said...

Is that why Utahns are so overweight?

November 9, 2009 7:25 PM 



James Goldberg said...

Actually, Utah ties for #42 among U.S. states as far as obesity rate. If a few more people would walk to church, we could easily fall down to #47 or even #50.

November 9, 2009 8:10 PM 

Mark D. said...

I know lots of people who walk to church, although more walk home than walk there. I think the main reason why people drive is to get the whole family there on time. And the parents can hardly leave until the smaller children are ready. Time constraints caused by meetings before and afterward are another major reason.

November 9, 2009 9:47 PM 



James Goldberg said...

Yes. I think there are lots of understandable reasons why we drive. I just hope we can find a way to cut through some of that hectic b/c of the value of walking when we're blessed with the proximity to make it possible.

In Columbus, Ohio, we drove fifteen minutes or so to church. The punctuality struggle there was that if we were running even a minute late, we usually got held up by a long train on the tracks between us and the chapel.


It's interesting the way families struggle to be on time whether it takes a minute or an hour to get to church. When you live close, it's hard for me to believe that driving prevents lateness so much as allows one other reason for everyone to procrastinate a few minutes longer.

November 9, 2009 11:04 PM 



WhiteEyebrows said...

The reason so many church members are overweight is that gluttony and overeating are the only vices not prosecuted under the word of wisdom.

November 10, 2009 8:36 AM 



James Goldberg said...

So, I realize that flippancy is the dominant tone in Internet conversation, but it feels a little out of place here. Here, we work to see scriptural


passages in new ways to renew our sense of connection to them and strengthen our power to generate usable insights from them. This post is about the spiritual virtues of walks that cars can draw us away from. It's ironic that the subsequent discussion has been about weight issues because they are beside the point. To think of walks as productive mainly to keep weight down strikes me as exactly the kind of goal-oriented, pressured, rushed modern mentality I am suggesting we should step back from. Even if walks did nothing to promote physical health, I believe that it is good to walk, especially with children, to promote a sense of connection and wonder which is elusive in modern life.

That the conversation has turned toward stereotype and blame-placing is perhaps a symptom of the underlying problem of rush and disconnection. Perhaps the speed and distance of the Internet, as I suggest, can foster the same literal insensitivity that I find problematic about the car experience. This does not mean, of course, that I will stop using cars or Internet, or that either is all bad. I'm just wondering what insights the scriptures might offer about how to be careful in our use of them.

November 10, 2009 11:59 AM 

Anonymous said...


Just found this blog. The Walking post is wonderful. Thank you! I'll be reading other posts now. Thanks also for you remarks in the comment section about flippancy.

November 10, 2009 6:56 PM 

Dennis said...

Hi, this is my first time at this blog. I really liked this post.

I think you'd be interested in a post I wrote a while back that is very similar--I talk about how walking to church is good for our souls (not just our bellies). In fact, it is quite remarkable some of the similar connections we have made (esp. in relation to D&C 61). Here's the link.

November 14, 2009 6:51 AM 



James Goldberg said...

Yes, that is a cool post. I also enjoyed the "about" section (and not just b/c the title reminds me of the four questions from Passover).

November 14, 2009 8:47 AM

After noticing the initial tonal shift, I checked the analytics on referring sites and traced the source. My theory is that because the referral came from a large Mormon culture blog, the

comments “imported” the dynamics of the larger Internet discourse over Mormonism, with its reckless and hasty accusations, defensiveness, etc. A satisfying fight never broke out, however, and most people moved on—but with at least my one post added to their life experience.

One possible shape of audience reading is the drive-by, in which references from larger sites bring a smaller site a temporary increase in traffic.

And a Possibility from *Caucajewmexdian*

Dashboard

Jul 1, 2009 - Apr 12, 2010 ▾



Site Usage

2,178 Visits

62.21% Bounce Rate

5,017 Pageviews

00:03:57 Avg. Time on Site

2.30 Pages/Visit

43.89% % New Visits

Possibility 4: A Reader-Pulling Thread

My *Caucajewmexdian* blog has had the lowest average traffic, probably mostly because the most complex average structures of the blog posts have meant that my posting frequency is lower. Fewer posts means both less frequent visits from regulars and less reason to become a regular reader.

In February and March, however, readership passed one hundred visits a week for the first time, largely because of the popularity of an extended thread called “My Beard and BYU.” Although I never posted it on Facebook, the thread discussed public issues (BYU Honor Code and minority dynamics) in a way that made it easy for interested readers to refer the content to

other readers. The strong sense of scalability and continuing story also seems to have helped readers integrate the thread itself into their routine, as evidenced by this comment:

[TS Anderson](#) said...

This saga is going to become my lunch-break treat!

[March 10, 2010 11:54 AM](#)

Here, the audience became more than a drive-by: readers interested in the thread would check back for updates, think about posts between installments, etc. Many of the readers, however, weren't regular readers of the blog, but drawn to the specific concerns of the thread.

Conclusion

Writing workshops often focus on a text's structure/shape, but every text also has a variety of shapes in terms of how it interacts with audience time and attention. This is particularly true of online texts, which typically embrace their reader-choice-driven organization more than, say, the novels my grandmother reads the end of do.

I've discussed four "shapes" of audience/textual temporal interaction that I've seen in my blogs. There are certainly others: hopefully this discussion will lead to future discussions about how such shapes might be identified and described. I've also tried to suggest that writers can use analytics to better guess at how audiences are interacting with their texts in the hopes that online writers will appreciate the variety and richness of audience interactions, and that through valuing

a variety of interactions, a broader and more diverse public will soon be seen as within the reach of literature.



“The executioner’s argument was, that you couldn’t cut off ahead unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he wasn’t going to begin at *his* time of life.”

“The King’s argument was that anything that had a head could be beheaded, and that you weren’t to talk nonsense.”

The Ephemeral Internet?

Book Burning

There is nothing quite like the self-righteous pleasure of a good book burning. In a book, the word has become incarnate, inexorably bound to its papery flesh, and can thus be symbolically sacrificed for the world’s sins. We become purer with each book that is burned, with each idea that no longer has a body.

It is for this reason that the visionary Aryan street-theatre-engineer is drawn to books.

Bo-dree-ard

A few months after I started work on the *Caucajewmexdian* blog, I showed it to my wife's thesis advisor, a gifted scholar with a special interest in various forms of ethnic life writing. I don't think she read more than a few words as I pulled it up on the screen. "This isn't real," she told me, "it's all just simulacra; Baudrillard talks about this...you should read him." She told me: "I know you have a great history. When you're ready to write a real book, I'd love to talk to you about it."

Come to Terms

In a class focused on texts that cross or call into question traditional generic boundaries, I made reference to my blogs. "How interesting," the professor said, "that you're willing to write in a form that's so ephemeral."

She said to me, "You've got to come to terms with that."

Brother Singh

The Association for Mormon Letters publishes an annual literary journal with a circulation of less than two hundred. Angela Hallstrom, who has served as an unpaid editor for the past six years, announced a month ago that she's stepping down. We thanked her for her service—the readership may be modest, but the quality of material she's collected has been good.

At the board meeting, I told her that just a few days before, I'd happened to run across a story called "Brother Singh" in what was probably her first issue as editor. I'd had no idea, until reading that story, that any texts existed outside of my family which engaged a Sikh-Mormon experience. I wasn't a reader when the story came out, I said, but I was glad she'd done the work that gave stories like that a home.

She said: "That's why I kept working on this—I think these stories will matter to people in the future." That far, I agreed with her perfectly. But then she turned my compliment a direction I hadn't expected: "People say that we should switch to an online format, but I don't want to because I want these stories to be *there* for people in the future to find."

There

What is this *there* that makes people value a print circulation of less than two hundred over an online audience of 750 (the number of visits to Angela's most recent post on the Association for Mormon Letters blog)? Is the common notion that books are somehow more real and permanent than digital writing accurate?

At the board meeting, I decided against telling Angela that I only came to read "Brother Singh" because a friend planned to throw away an unread copy of the literary journal to save space on her bookshelf, and I'd compulsively flipped through it first. I decided not to tell Angela that though I sit on the AML Board, if it weren't for that story, my own sense of space economy would have doomed the issue to a recycling bin.

I also decided not to tell Angela that if the story were published online instead of in print, I could send the link to numerous family members: people who I have not burdened with the advice to hunt down the rare six-year-old copies of the small-circulation journal in order to find the story.

I also did not tell Angela that her comment immediately made me think of the BARN (Borrower's Automated Retrieval Network) at the Utah State University Library—a giant storage facility for seldom-used journals where it is entirely possible that one of the two hundred copies of “Brother Singh” is kept, a storage system so tight that books are only retrieved on command, not by browsing.

I did not tell Angela that in the present and perhaps also in the future, a story is preserved more by the number of paths and references to it than by its physical presence on some bookshelf (or in some garbage dump). Did not tell her that barring the Apocalypse or a similar collapse in civilization, information is more likely to be re-accessed and discussed in an international community if stored and made available on the Internet than if bound only in books.

Why spoil the night?

Bapuji

My grandfather tells me that when he was born, in an undivided Punjab in 1935, village genealogists still memorized centuries' worth of local family lines. Because these oral genealogists were Muslim, however, such memories fled with Partition, the long arm of oral memory irrevocably severed. My grandfather recorded the names of a few ancestors, but for

years made little progress in his search for records of his ancestors. Difficult government bureaucracies held the keys to poorly organized records, and many of the records carried little or inconsistently kept information.

A few years ago, my grandfather went back to Punjab determined to find more. Through a series of fortunate events, he found out about and then got access to land records from the initial British census of Punjab in 1848. These records were used for tax collection and were therefore meticulous. They worked against the persistent recurrence of many Punjabi names by identifying each individual by listing four generations of ancestors. For the genealogist or historian, these records are a treasure.

Unfortunately, they're kept in poorly maintained storage facilities, where mice and snakes often chew on them. Access is guarded by local officials who restrict access to goods under their control as a matter of habit, sometimes to encourage bribes.

My grandfather has worked hard to gain the appropriate permissions to digitize these records. Where oral preservation has failed and written preservation is in danger, he hopes that digital preservation will succeed and enable the records to survive.

Coining Terms

Nine months ago, a Google search for "Caucajewmexdian" yielded no results. Now, there are 598 results from 36 sites. A search for the exact phrase "Mormon Midrashim" has gone from no results to 241 results from 25 sites. Neither figure takes into account all the links to posts which don't give the blog title correctly or by full name. But perhaps they are sufficient to

suggest that because of the interconnectedness of the Internet, my writings are more likely to be connected to, found, and preserved in the discourse online that they might be in a marginalized journal or book.

All earthly things are, perhaps, essentially ephemeral. I see no reason, however, to believe that the less palpable nature of blogs makes them any more ephemeral than books, for which palpability is a byproduct and not the essence.



“I didn’t know it was *your* table,’ said Alice: ‘it’s laid for a great many more than three.’”

Digital Street Theatre

I’ve discussed, in my chapter on revision, how riffing off one’s own content can become an important element of blog writing. In a good blog, you are constantly creating mini-genres and doing theme and variations work within them.

Take, for example, the “Commie Awards.” I had noticed fairly early that the comments on *My Life and Hard Times* were unusually clever and funny—an unexpected pleasure of audience interaction with the blog’s tone. As I smiled, laughed, and occasionally had my brain turned upside-down by the comments, I developed a desire to reward the best and instill in the commenters a sense of playfully competitive pride in their work. With help from my then-fiancée, I started a monthly series called the “Commie Awards.”

The Commie Awards served to honor the best comments, but also gave me space, through the convention of a monthly “guest presenter,” to play with history or social commentary as many of my other posts did. The first Commie Awards post, for example, made some sardonic comments about guest presenter Leon Trotsky’s role in history. The second explained that while guest presenter Joe McCarthy was “not technically a communist” he nonetheless “shared a communist affinity for abuse of authority, systematic scare tactics, and grand political plans based on laundry lists.” The third Commie Awards post, taking a jab at conservative rhetoric during the healthcare debate, introduced its guest presenter by explaining that “Mother Teresa is, as a proponent of unearned healthcare, apparently a communist by association.”

Because December hadn’t featured many memorable comments, I decided to turn the joke by having Joseph Stalin coerce his way in serving as guest presenter, and then having him threaten the nominees (including me), and then give the award to himself. That was a fun move, but would not have been memorable in and of itself.

Fortunately, it came a day before we discussed my blogs in John Bennion’s fiction workshop. The discussion was lively and interesting as various writers tried to come to terms with the differences in possibility between traditional print fiction forms and a blog. Of particular concern for some students was the lack of a clear beginning and end to a blog—a discussion which led me to quip that a blog ends definitively when the writer dies.

After class, my friend Dennis suggested that the Stalin Commie Awards presented me with an opportunity to do something like that. What if, he proposed, I were to have myself killed,

or at least forced into hiding, by this guest presenter who refused to leave. How might the audience dynamic change if the author were replaced by an author-hostile character-as-author? This struck me as the perfect riff and I decided to go for it. My next post, written from a separate blogger account under the name of “Drona” went like this:

Wednesday, February 3, 2010

[Guest Post: On Cowards](#)

While James Goldberg is in hiding, the *members of the Commie Awards committee have designated me as the official interim guest blogger.

Although the blog form is by default superficial (even when it pretends depth), I've decided to accept the position out of loyalty.

Thank you, comrades, for appointing me to this work.

As for you readers: expect more regular updates than from the infamously unreliable Goldberg. Also expect superior content, which makes more sense and doesn't enjoy lying quite so much. I can assure you, my readers, that when I lie it will be only as strictly necessary and not because I'm a decadent hobo who thinks that getting caught while lying is fun.


I'll also be putting up a picture in every post. (Everyone knows that multimedia posts are the future. As Goldberg's other blogs show, however,

he has an unfortunate weakness for the past. Pathetic.)



A good picture should inspire. It is like a breath of fresh air in a smoggy, smoggy world.

*surviving

Posted by Drona at [8:39 AM](#) 

Labels: [Stalin](#)

For the next ten days, my blog was run by “Drona” while I was in hiding, posting counter-manifestos on a secret blog. Just as readers had responded to the regular tone of the blog with humorous comments for months, they responded to the takeover by adopting character-tones, treating their comments like part of a developing play. The comments on Drona’s third post, a “Manifesto on Writing” went like this:

5 comments:



Kathy Cowley said...

Dear Drona,


I agree with you that there is something inherently political about the English language.

In fact, that's what George Orwell argues in *Politics and the English Language*

However, you take it a little too far. Orwell's rules create good writings...yours, well, I'll believe it when I say it. Needless to say, your manifesto has officially broken Orwell's final rule ("Break any of these rules before saying anything outright barbarous.")

Gives James back his blog. Please.

-Kathy

February 5, 2010 11:52 AM 



Drona said...


Kathy (if that really is your name),

Actions speak louder than words. Your friend "George" supported a faction which collaborated with fascists during the Spanish Civil War. Do you still think his essay is so great?

Also--if a man can't even tell the truth about a simple thing like his own name, what makes you think his writing advice is worth trusting?

As to your other point--if James is prepared to publicly admit his mistakes and start writing the way a person should, I'd be more than happy to give him his blog back. Since he's unlikely to do that, I'd be more than more happy to write an obituary for him. As a matter of fact, I'm currently working on a draft.

-Drona

February 5, 2010 1:22 PM 



Drona said...

P.S. The draft obituary is extremely short, because my mother used to tell me "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all," advice which takes whole topics and people out of the realm of language.

So far, all I've got is "James Goldberg died..."

February 5, 2010 1:25 PM 




Emily said...

Dear Drona,

Thank you for so beautifully articulating what closet fascists like me only imply.

Big Sister

PS - ignore the name associated with this comment. She is only a puppet.

February 5, 2010 4:32 PM 

[Samizdat](#) said...

I think the key to good writing is to be published by a major press.

Good cover design also helps.

February 6, 2010 8:34 PM

Consider Kathy's comment in this thread. By addressing "Drona" as the guest author rather than responding to me, she reinforces the recent theatrical convention. By ending her comment with "Give James his blog back. Please," she becomes a character in this drama, articulating an objective in opposition to that of the character Drona. By commenting back as Drona, I try to reinforce the feeling in the audience that in this phase, their comments have a special interactive power to draw out the new Drona character.

Emily's comment joins the drama in a different way than Kathy's. She doesn't simply act as herself, but adapts the persona of "Big Sister," thus giving her license to act in a way counter to the objective the situation might suggest for readers, adding to the complexity of the guest author-audience relationship.

Finally, my comment as Samizdat is an attempt to add to the drama by providing an investigative element. There's a tension between the name ("samizdat" were Soviet-era self-published and secretly-circulated subversive works) and the comment content designed to arouse

curiosity among those paying careful attention. Clicking on the name leads not to a separate blogger profile, but rather to an innocuous post on the secret blog where I continue to post with my normal *My Life and Hard Times* authorial persona. I hoped that through this and subsequent hints, readers would eventually realize that they could somehow actively pursue the objective of removing Drona by finding me, and also that they could find me by following a trail of clues. I also increased the pressure on readers to restore the blog to normal by progressively changing the physical appearance of the blog. First, I changed the blog subtitle. Next, I changed the title and subtitle red. I then changed the side picture of “the Author.” Finally, I changed the title and subtitle back to black, but changed the entire blog background to a bright and distracting red. Several readers commented on that final change.

As it turned out, several readers found me fairly quickly, though using a broader variety of methods than I’d anticipated, ranging from careful exploration of blog posts in the past that gave things away, to following information on my profile, to Googling leaked phrases. The first readers to find me dropped hints to others and leaked my counter-manifestos in anonymous comments, reinforcing the theatrical situation by hiding identities. A few commenters also began to use the Name-Url comment identity function I used to leave clues, thereby leaving their own hidden elements of the expanding game. For example—after commenter dadeckr had himself virtually killed off by another commenter he’d created named GreyTrenchCoat, he posted a virtual obituary on his blog and linked to it. He also created a new blog as the virtual home of the assassin and linked to it as well.

In addition to these hidden blogs, the communist takeover generated at least one anti-Drona Facebook group and several Facebook posts by the main actors. The writer-audience interaction, in this case, not only changed the nature of the digital space on my blog, but also spilled out beyond the nominal boundaries of the blog into other digital spaces.

The incredible flexibility of many online reader-writers makes possible an exciting brand of online street theatre. How else could such forms be used?

“Free speech” according to Abbie Hoffman, “is the right to shout ‘theatre!’ in a crowded fire.” In the wild and often heated public spheres of the Internet, what theatre might we yet shout?

THE END

Unlike the blogs it is drawn from, this thesis now comes to a clear and definitive end. Maybe you agree with many of the things I've said. Maybe you don't, but still enjoyed the ride. Or maybe the Non-linear Reading chapter upset your stomach so badly you had to throw up in the Appendix, and you're currently thinking about how you'll never have the hours you spent here back.

Since I'm a blogger, of course, I'd love to hear what you have to say. So, too, may much of this work's future audience. Choose your words wisely: the tone and caliber of what you say will help shape what sort of space this work becomes.

Commenting is, of course, not strictly traditional as part of a thesis text. But don't let that stop you—and don't let the technical limitations stop you either! If you are reading a paper copy of this thesis, just *write* your comment below. Then, the next time I read that copy, I can comment back! (Things are harder, of course, if you're reading the .pdf—but you are clever, so I will leave that to your imagination.)

Name:

Comment:

Date:

Name:

Comment:

Date:

Name:

Comment:

Date:

Name:

Comment:

Date:

Name:

Comment:

Date:

Appendix—Miscellaneous Hyperlink Destinations

I. This Cat Can't Be Executed:



But [this link](#) can send you back to where you once belonged.

II.

Monday, August 22, 2010

[The Wikipedia Olympics](#)

Don't get me wrong--I like the modern Olympics. It touches my soul to see just what sort of obscure, typically-useless-but-nonetheless-amazing feats the human body (with a little help from state-of-art equipment, expensive training facilities and support staff, and occasionally perform-enhancing

drugs) can do. It warms my heart to see the key cultural exchanges that happen when host cities bribe members of the IOC. And it brings little tears of gratitude to my eyes when snowboarders get in trouble for smoking marijuana, proving that even the most determined athletes can throw years of hard work away for one joint.

I'm not convinced, though, that our modern Olympic are playing the same roll that the ancient Greek Olympics did.

You see, the ancient Greek Olympics were not (contrary to popular opinion) simply a vast leisure gathering of naked men from dozens of habitually hostile city-states. Events in the Greek Olympics featured skills that mattered in routine military life: running speed, for example, actually mattered in an era when messengers could change the course of a campaign. And the original Olympics did often promote peace between the major powers, as evidenced by roadside inscriptions such as "Welcome to Corinth, Home of the Silver Medal Javelin-Thrower. Invade At Your Own Risk."

The modern Olympics, however, much like a modern Philosophy Department, feature skills with no outside application whatsoever. Michael Phelps may be the fastest swimmer in human history, but he still has to earn his daily bread selling his body to advertisers--the Navy just

isn't interested in how fast he could deliver a message to one of their ships. The modern Olympics also are poorly suited to foster world peace, as anyone who has been to a drunken soccer riot or the city of Columbus after an OSU-Michigan football game will quickly realize.

Would it be possible in our day an age to create an Olympics featuring skills with actual application? Those of you who cheated by reading this post's title will probably be tempted to say yes.

If so, give in to that temptation. Yes, the Wikipedia Olympics can train us for real life virtual skills!

In the first event, Hypersprinting, we will race to see who can get from Kevin Bacon to Chiang Kai-shek in the smallest number of clicks, exercising our hyperlink hunting skills.

In the second event, Onlying, we will compete to see who can insert the most impressive misinformation into Wikipedia, with points being awarded for prominence of corrupted article, extremity of fabrication, and duration of duplicitous edit. This will teach us PR skills for life.

In the final event, Figure Surfing, we will see who can come up with the most beautiful and surprising path of exactly 13 clicks from Periwinkle to

Plutarch. This will teach us to see the associative beauty of the world.

So go for the gold in this first annual Wikipedia Olympics!

Or just go back to [where you were](#) in the Hyperlink Chapter.

III. See <http://www.rage-india.com/dilse/love.htm> to read about the seven stages of love in *Dil Se*.

Se. Or—better yet!—look at the following tiny screenshots of the first three instead:



Dil Se..
a Mani Ratnam film

According to ancient Arabic literature, love is classified into seven different shades. This is true even today.


Dil Se is a journey through these 7 shades of love. The feelings are as old as mankind, only the circumstances have changed.

Come step through the shades of love with us...

[The First Shade of Love](#) 

[Dil Se Home](#) [7 Shades of Love](#) [Cast & Credits](#) [Meet Shahrukh Khan](#) [Songs & downloads](#)

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Email : mailus@dilse.com





Dil Se..

a Mani Ratnam film


HUB . . .

eyes meet,
it is like a touch...
a spark...

Attraction



[Previous](#)



[Next Shade](#)



Dil Se..

a Mani Ratnam film

UNS . . .

the touch of the eyes
was as if,
it was...

Infatuation



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Aren't you glad you stayed in my document for a guided tour instead of visiting the real page?

After all, you wouldn't want to get to the next page, where she "touches him like a whisper."

And you certainly wouldn't want to be able to go back to the first page to click on "Meet Shahrukh Khan" or "Songs and Downloads."

You'd much rather have only the choice to go [back to my chapter](#).