

“How violently the hands of even very senior figures shook”<sup>1</sup>:  
Peer Review Between Encomium and Invective

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There was a time when I refused to read book reviews, be they of fiction (still the case) or non-fiction.<sup>2</sup> Word-of-mouth, a short blurb, or a quick skim of a first paragraph of a review were sufficient for me to decide to read or not to read. I wanted to approach a book “cold” and make my own opinion.<sup>3</sup> I had a heated argument about this with a best friend, who said I was being unprofessional. And I was furthermore shocked to realize that some people read book reviews *instead of* reading the book. Imagine that! Then reality hit, and life in the university took its toll—too many seminars to prepare, too little time in the archives, too many meetings, too many books to read, and too little time to keep up with everything.

Thus, entrusting my judgment to that of others, I began to read book reviews and, in passing, began to realize all of the work it takes to bring them to the readers’ eyes: the physicality of receiving submissions, “weeding the stack,” deciding on reviewers, sending them the book, hounding them about deadlines (and listening to sometimes heart-rending stories about why a review is late), copy-editing and proofing the final review (see David Kammerling Smith’s article in this salon). We can thank all journal review departments for this heroic task and thank H-France for this salon to ponder the process in all of its materiality and metaphysicality.

It is the latter, of course, which is at the nub of the angst and takes the discussion beyond book reviews *per se*. From Virgil reading his work to friends and families before “publishing” his words on a papyrus roll, to the formal “disputation” of the medieval universities in a period when a vocabulary of insults fed religious and other polemics, to the ideal of the Republic of Letters well charted by Ann Blair, the function of scholarly critique has been as varied historically as it has been fraught with both praise and scorn. It may be public, through printed book reviews, or shuttered behind confidential evaluation letters. All are supposed to maintain professional standards in the scholarly world.

The book review in particular is a multifaceted object that, I would argue, needs to be seen from the multiple perspectives of its writers, its readers, and the poor author of the book in question,

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Jones, “Cat Massacres, the Jones Conundrum, and Peer Review,” *H-France Salon*, vol. 15 (2015), Issue 20, #9: 2.

<sup>2</sup> I still stockpile reviews until I’ve read the book and then enjoy comparing my opinion with the reviewers. I will readily admit, however, that I have more saved reviews than read books.

<sup>3</sup> Gérard Genette, however, has well warned us that book covers, prefaces, and the like are all “thresholds” of expectations as we enter a book. Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1987).

smiling or frowning as his or her book comes under someone else's microscope. This issue of *H-France Salon* provides a welcome overview of the gamut of the exercise, ranging from graciousness<sup>4</sup> to nausea.

First, the ideal. The notion of a Republic of Letters, of polite if nonetheless vigorous scholarly exchange, was not always with us. The chronology of critique has for the most part morphed from medieval invective to early modern civility, largely propagated from the seventeenth century on thanks in large part to Pierre Bayle, as Blair shows. The culture of salon get-togethers (real not virtual) themselves were active agents of (elite) polite exchange. And it is no surprise that this ideal is referred to in several of this salon's articles and is incorporated into the *H-France Review* Guidelines, urging "courteous, temperate, and constructive" book reviews. Tone counts, as does the underlying principle of intellectual freedom. Most of us would undoubtedly agree that controversy is fine but decorum should hold sway. By the nineteenth century, this ideal also became part of the notion of the professionalization of the academic trade, another way of distinguishing historians from amateurs. Furthermore, such professionalization-via-book-reviews also became a way of defining a field or a methodology. The *Annales* School used it in its critique of *histoire événementielle* (Michael Scott Christofferson); French historians in the United States have used book reviews to show off their expertise to their French colleagues (John L. Harvey).

The positive uses of the book review are thus many—for book reviewers, book authors, and the review's readers alike. The reviewers can show off their professional credentials and learn a lot about a book while doing so (G. Matthew Adkins); reading to review is far different than skimming, and it is often a very satisfying plunge into the logics and mechanics of another author's writing. Authors get the satisfaction of being read in depth, having their ideas engaged, and, in the best of cases, even being pushed toward new questions (Catherine Nesci).<sup>5</sup> And readers of reviews (as this convert quickly realized) can gain insight into academic arguments and whole fields summed up in a page or two. All in all, scholarly debate and professionalization can thrive, bringing together on the pages or screens of book review sections the polite exchange of seventeenth-century elite salons, with the often unseen David Kammerling Smiths and other journal editors hosting the "event." We should not, however, forget the real work that book reviews entail. If they are labor savers for their readers, they are labor intensive for writers and editors. And they are free publicity for the authors under scrutiny.

If only it were not for the vainglory, the "logomachia" of quarrelsome pedants, bemoaned since the Middle Ages,<sup>6</sup> even leading to a sixteenth-century broken nose over a spelling dispute! (Blair) The moderation and self-control encouraged since the seventeenth century often seem to have fallen by the wayside in some of today's canon wars. The negative review is battle fodder

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<sup>4</sup> Or, as one French colleague recently commented about his mentor, "Il poussait l'amabilité à me faire un compte rendu élogieux dans les *Annales*." Denis Woronoff at the homage to Louis Bergeron, EHESS, October 23, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Even when the aleatory nature of book reviews is evident. I was clued in to this early on when an otherwise tepid review of my first book praised it ... for something I had not done.

<sup>6</sup> See also Antoine Destemberg, *L'honneur des universitaires au Moyen Âge. Étude d'imaginaire social* (Paris: PUF, 2015).

for some, existential *nausée* for others, as G. Matthew Adkins so forcefully laments.<sup>7</sup> The mean book review indicts after all not just the author, but all of those who approved the book's publication, from other scholars to the publisher. One could add that it may indict the reviewer as well for poor manners or an over-the-top screech. While trying to define the distinction between hostile and critical reviews, Adkins and Nesci go over some of the arguments mustered in the negative review: nothing new under the (academic) sun; the evidence doesn't justify the conclusion; the argument is not clear. And we could include that give-away criticism: the author missed a crucial bibliographic reference ... often to the reviewer's own work. To which reproaches beleaguered authors, when they respond (a tricky endeavor indeed), generally counter that they have been wildly misread, that the review is a gross mischaracterization and/or a fundamental incomprehension due to insufficient reading of the book, etc. Adkins is the most critical of the mean critics, describing the book review exercise as a veritable battlefield ranging from "a sort of academic Hobbesian war of all against all" to "academic star-gladiators" impaling each other. Methodological or theoretical axes are ground. We all have our favorite examples of book reviews that are destructive rather than constructive, monologues rather than dialogues, or mostly full of intellectual posturing—the opposite of the idealized Republic of Letters.

Beyond this useful explicit pondering of the range of the good, the bad, or the ugly book review, another issue brought up in this salon is equally important albeit usually decidedly less visible. Tom McDonough asks pertinent questions about the relationship between knowledge and power, that is, about the institutional and disciplinary constraints inherent in the exercise of scholarly critique. Following Jean-François Lyotard, he raises the vexed question of how our scholarly lives (as genteel and intellectually free as we may idealize them) are rooted in institutional formats that have an impact upon scholarly research. Institutions and disciplines are the arenas of our debates, not to mention university presses which function as economic filters (Christofferson). How is our access to knowledge mediated by the institutions in which we are embedded: the universities which pay us, the publishers who choose what to publish, the book review editors who decide to whom a book will be sent for review?

In addition to institutional factors, disciplinary and methodological boundaries can become their own sheriffs of right and wrong. Can interdisciplinarity—that late twentieth-century buzzword—solve the problem? Certainly not the instrumentalized institutional interdisciplinarity that McDonough worries about, which can lead universities to abolish departments or hire one scholar for the price of two, but rather a "decentered" (another buzzword) approach to scholarship and knowledge. A worthy endeavor, to be sure. But what does this mean for the book review business and evaluation in general? Daniel Brewer takes a hopeful approach to the mobile, transversal quality of scholarly work, where the "republic," the "community," or the "marketplace" of ideas interact. Yet he recognizes that what counts in each discipline may be different in terms of evidence, innovation, or conceptions of time. And, as Catherine Nasci also reminds us, reviewing across disciplinary lines can be tricky. This may be where misunderstandings, even nastiness, can occur, which, in turn, tells us as much about our disciplinary borders as anything else.

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<sup>7</sup> Both in his role as publication editor for *H-France Review* and in reaction to part of his own experience. I can report that oral history findings attest to real nausea and hot tears as well.

In addition to disciplinary boundaries lie the national ones. Both Colin Jones and Annie Jourdan argue that, in spite of globalization, different practices of scholarly critique persist. Regardless of the hailed internationalization or transnationalism of our lives and scholarly debates, different settings can be dazzling or frazzling; the “show and tell” of American seminars can be a far fling from the intellectual sparring at a *soutenance de thèse* in France, both different still from the monotone-to-rapier-thrust model of the British academic seminar: therapy, fireworks, and blood sport to use Jones’s comparative descriptions of academic life in different locations. If, in spite of internationalism, local differences remain as strong as ever (the “Jones conundrum”), what to do about transnational peer review? Critical praise from Europeans can derail an American tenure process; unqualified praise from Americans can seem silly to European committees. I once sat in on a job search in France where the over-the-top letter of recommendation for one candidate, written by a Frenchman long-established in the United States, caused some snickers, leading another (French and American-based) scholar to defend the letter-writer as having, poor thing, been contaminated (Americanized) by his offshore experience. Although I do not necessarily recognize the specific stereotypes that Jourdan laments, she also starkly points to the cultural (but also political and institutional?) differences that exist due to different styles of evaluation in different countries. For anyone working across borders, the Jones conundrum rings true. It may indeed be that the phlegmatic British, the hotheaded French, the touchy-feely Americans have produced rather different styles of scholarly critique. However, such views can be just as quickly disproven by sword-wielding British, mutual pat-on-the-back French, and nausea-inducing American reviewers. As seen above, it does not take cross-national difference to produce an unpleasant book review. The locals can swipe at each other for a multitude of other reasons.

The international conundrum also points to an important older debate over insider versus outsider epistemological vantage points. In this respect, location counts.<sup>8</sup> It has both advantages and disadvantages. “Foreigners often make the best historians,” said William R. Thayer in 1905. From the late nineteenth century, Americans working on France often argued that they had a “cognitive detachment” which made them empowered “outsiders” who could evaluate French scholarship through the dual process of both professionalization and internationalization (Harvey). Brewer argues convincingly for the productive tension between the universal and the particular forms of knowledge. This does not mean, however, that cross-national book reviews and letters of recommendation don’t risk being taxed with methodological nationalism, especially when they are not to the author’s liking. Unless, on the contrary, they are hailed as impartial validation when they are positive. Here, too, then, the emic/etic opposition is both useful and limited.

Finally, however, we need to ask how scholarly styles differ not just over space but over time. Intellectual fads come and go. Transnational borrowings may be rejected then favored. My favorite example is William B. Cohen’s early and important *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880*, published in the United States in 1980. A year later, when it appeared in French, sociologist/demographer/historian and/or anthropologist (as he is variously described, *essayiste donc*) Emmanuel Todd wrote a scathing review, outraged that a U.S. scholar was thrusting an American concept—racism—onto French history. Todd framed

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy L. Green, “Location, Location, Location: We Are Where We Write?” AHR Roundtable Comment, *American History Review* 119 (June 2014): 809-16.

his critique with a damning epistemological put-down: “L’ouvrage est construit comme un dinosaure. Le corps est gros, la tête minuscule: les faits sont nombreux, la réflexion est mince”—another cutting stereotype of Franco-American scholarly difference. Yet, thirty years later, Cohen’s book has become required reading for anyone interested in racism in France, described by historian Pap Ndiaye as a “livre méconnu et pionnier” that “fourmille de pistes et de réflexions passionnantes.”<sup>9</sup>

This salon has the virtue of letting us ponder collectively the history of scholarly critique, its virtues, its excesses, its variations over time and space and the problems of boundaries—institutional, disciplinary, national. One last issue is crucial: what difference does format make? Not just the fact that we are holding this salon without the advantage of hashing out these ideas face-to-face, glasses of sherry, wine, or coke in hand. There are Blair’s interesting comments on the multiple impacts of print with which I would like to end. Print widened the audiences reached, while introducing institutional—publishers’—interests. She argues that this led to authors digging in their heels with regard to their arguments or calculating strategic sprints to time their publications before the Frankfurt Book Fair (Luther vs. Erasmus). Concluding that early modern critique was already self-consciously both rhetorical and strategic, she concludes with the inevitable question of how the online format has an impact on peer review today. One thing is clear: H-France filled a needed void for book reviews in our field. Furthermore, the online format theoretically offers a fuller and faster format for venting. True, this can still lead to logorrhea or nausea, depending. A subsequent salon could take on more frontally other forms of evaluation and ask what difference other formats of evaluation make, namely public versus “confidential,” that is, published reviews compared to the letter of recommendation, the tenure review, the reviewing of manuscript and grant proposals. All the while recognizing that *who* is chosen to evaluate is key in the first place. And, finally, what about all of those anonymous online commentators?

“Is this what scholarship is all about?” wails Adkins when faced with the mean-spirited review. Book reviews may be low in status in the profession, providing few points for tenure or promotion (Christofferson) and costly in other ways: in terms of time and perhaps friendships. (Even one unfortunate adjective can enrage an author against a reviewer.) We can question the inside jobs (friends reviewing friends) and bemoan the outside jobs (enemies skewering enemies). We can curse the book reviews for all of their flaws, although we may also note that there seem to be few broken noses today. However, between the alternative of *never* reading book reviews or *only* reading book reviews (instead of books themselves), both options are clearly inoperable for the scholarly spread of ideas. As Colin Jones argues, the qualitative peer review is still better than bureaucratic bibliometrics. Damn the book review. Long live the book review.

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<sup>9</sup> William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980; 2nd ed., 2003); *Français et Africains: Les Noirs dans le regard des Blancs, 1530-1880* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981); Emmanuel Todd, “Les Français sont-ils racistes?—Un universitaire américain surpris en flagrant délire historique,” *Le Monde*, February 19, 1982, p. 16; Pap Ndiaye, “‘Français et Africains’ de William B. Cohen,” *L’Histoire* 374 (April 2012): 96. Bill and I chuckled over Todd’s review for years. It is truly a pity that Bill did not live to see how his work is cited today in France.

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