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A Personal Perspective on Book Reviewing

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Over twenty-five years ago, as I received an invitation to prepare my first book review, I was elated to write for an important journal in my field of French literary studies and on a valuable volume.[1] Yet while trained in the field to which the book contributed, I had little preparation for such an academic exercise and had to research the codes and modes of critical reading practices adopted by scholarly journals. Although the journal editor did not provide criteria and recommendations for the evaluation, common sense and a perusal of various journals dictated that a peer reviewer ought to report carefully on the book's content, assess with rigor the soundness of its scholarship, and express with impartiality the value of a colleague's work.[2] Learning how to attain such lofty goals turned out to be a rewarding, if never-ending journey, mainly because I learned that we need to be experts in the book's field(s) if we are to use appropriate evaluation criteria. Such an exercise also entails that we keep abreast of current research trends within our own discipline(s) and, increasingly, in other disciplines. Changing canons that set the context for reviewing scholarly books and varying disciplinary standards in different national locations also make the practice of academic critiquing more challenging. Moreover, and this is something we all learn along the way, an overwhelming part of our work as academics engages us in regular evaluation and interpretive negotiations in our interactions with students and colleagues at our own university as well as other institutions.[3] Paradoxically, whereas academic book reviewing is hardly rewarded in merit and promotion cases, it is nevertheless as indispensable as all other kinds of evaluation. Book reviews herald the publication of new books, thus supporting their visibility and sale, yet they only rarely find their way in scholarly bibliographies.

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[1] Catherine Nesci, review of *Old Goriot. Landmarks of World Literature*, by David Bellos, in *French Forum* 14 (May 1989): 238–239. The book being half scholarly, half textbook, it was a "safe" mission to undertake for a budding Balzac scholar.

[2] I am now more aware that "common sense" is a fuzzy criterion for ethical standards. On this, see Mark Wiley, "How to Read a Book: Reflections on the Ethics of Book Reviewing," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 13 (Fall 1993): 477–492. Referring to another scholar, Wiley mentions that common sense is "not free standing but is itself a cultural construct implicated in a tradition characterized by specific discursive practices" (p. 485).

[3] For good citizens of the academic community, the list of performances as evaluator is a long one. Not only do we provide critical and evaluative comments on books in print and manuscripts, and occasionally write (positive) book blurbs, we also conduct anonymous reviews of research articles, conference abstracts, grant proposals, tenure and promotion cases, and we read and report on individual and departmental evaluations.

When David Kammerling Smith invited me to participate in the *H-France Salon* on "the practice and ethics of scholarly critiquing," he gave me the opportunity to draw on my own personal experience and reflect on the responses to my books in order to provide perspectives on "legitimate criticisms and illegitimate ones." Within academic journals, a book reviewer serves both as "translator" of a colleague's latest work for other readers and as participant in ongoing debates in scholarly communities and sub-communities. In her own short guide to the ethics of book reviewing, Lynn Z. Bloom aptly states that reviewing can never be fully objective but that it "can—and must—be fair."[4] To take a personal example, the great majority of reviews of my 2007 book, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses,* I would say, were fair evaluations. Overall reviewers applied appropriate criteria of evaluation within the framework of my field of nineteenth-century French studies, expressed constructive criticisms, and avoided misrepresentation. I am immensely grateful to the colleagues who took the time to read a long and dense book and performed their task as translators with precision and elegance; most did so within the parameters of my scholarly field and provided a thoughtful dialogue with their own. I am also equally grateful to those who pointed out flaws in my reasoning and lacuna in my scholarship, thus helping me to examine the materials I had interpreted with a new lens while enriching current scholarly dialogues.

I cannot recall any "illegitimate criticisms" or unjustifiable ones. Unfavorable reviews, I surmise, were due to the interdisciplinary nature of my inquiry, its feminist goal, and possibly the limited length of the evaluation and altogether divergent scholarly objective and standards. While working on the book, I had trained myself in various disciplines, reaching beyond literary studies with a feminist bent and an interest in text/image relations to critical and social theory, the history of perception, and urban and space studies, among other fields. I believe that some critics expressed indirectly a bias against feminist scholarship or against a methodology or conceptual framework with which they may not have been familiar or that they rejected. In my opinion, hostile reviewers who express a bias based on their rejection of a given methodology, without explicitly stating their own critical and theoretical stances, disrespect the guidelines of ethical reviewing. Illegitimate are also those criticisms that demonstrate either that reviewers have skimmed but not carefully read the book or have based their overall evaluation on a section of the book rather than the whole project. Partial consideration and misrepresentation also disregard the criteria of ethical critiquing. A simple and obvious tenet is that we should only accept to review a book in which we have a solid expertise and should recuse ourselves from conducting reviews of books dealing with issues and adopting methodologies to which we are not open.

That said, except in rare cases of mean-spirited evaluations, don't we all learn from unfavorable reviews? Being misunderstood certainly creates disappointment, but also offers opportunities for self-questioning regarding our scholarly choices and biases. For example the brief, synthetic evaluation of *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses* by historian Máire Cross made me think about my lack of clarity in terms of methodologies and argument for someone whose work has been to reflect on how we know the past while fostering scholarship in women and gender studies.[5] Further self-scrutiny focused on my espousal of academic trends, which some colleagues consider as

[4] Lynn Z. Bloom, "How to Write About Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius—and Those that Are Not. A Guide to Ethics in book Reviewing," *Journal of Information Ethics* 11 (Spring 2002): 7–17, quotation on 8.

[5] Máire Cross, *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 63 (2009): 351.

fads and link to canon wars; self-analysis thus helped me reflect more deeply on the ways in which I conduct my research or the selections I make for my scholarship and teaching practices. The issues of the authority and ethos of the critic are, I believe, complex ones, especially when it comes to cross-disciplinary reviews such as the ones that *H-France* often conducts. As book reviewers within our own field(s), we strive to use relevant evaluative criteria for sound scholarship and judge whether a book has achieved valuable goals for the academic discipline we represent. In so doing we also report on ongoing scholarly debates, demonstrate our knowledge of the field(s), and also display our command of the themes, issues, and methods of a given field. We thus often project a certain ethos, namely the qualities that make us appear as a trustworthy critic/speaker. It is certainly much more difficult to assess the value, strengths, and weaknesses of a book that deploys several interpretive practices, research methodologies, and scholarly approaches.

Let me present my 2007 book before I turn to what I deem "legitimate" criticisms. I am aware that, in our days of curtailed scholarly publishing and contracting humanistic fields, it is indeed a privilege to have one's work reviewed in journals and even more by *H-France* reviewers, as the issue of space is not at stake and its online platform offers more of a sense of dialogue rather than monologic practice. Furthermore, being asked to comment on the responses to my own work for an *H-France Salon* renews the feeling of privilege. Three factors that may have contributed to such opportunities involve the topic of a book focused on the gender of *flânerie* in French romanticism, its interdisciplinary reach in feminist and modernist studies, and the preface eminent scholar Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson wrote for the book.[6] The "flâneur" as myth, concept, and cultural icon of urban modern culture has had a rich critical and artistic life since Baudelaire turned this male figure of urban observation into the avant-garde artist par excellence in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863). In his piece Baudelaire also commented upon Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), which features contrasting enactments of a London flâneur as man of the crowd, detective, and likely criminal. Immersed within the modern city and its bewildering crowds, Baudelaire's "painter of modern life" and Poe's "men of the crowd" embody the flâneur as a figure of observation, interpretation, and artistic creation, on the one hand, and exhilaration, isolation, and alienation, on the other hand. In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin focused on this iconic figure and its various avatars (as Bohemian, rag-picker, detective, conspirator, prostitute, etc.) when he researched the ways in which modernizing metropolises altered the patterns of temporal and spatial experience. There is still no official form in English to designate the female counterpart to the male flâneur, and yet, in the 1980s, when feminist critiques of modernism started addressing the gendered preconception of modernist cultures and literatures, the *flâneuse* generated lively debates and polemics in feminist sociology and feminist art history.[7] Further stimulating uses of the flâneur/flâneuse concept in cultural and urban history, literary theory, and film studies helped fashion new models of

[6] Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, "Flâneries insolites," preface to Catherine Nesci, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses. Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique* (Grenoble: Ellug, 2007), 7–11.

[7] Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity," *Theory, Culture and Society* 2 (1985): 37–46, reprinted in *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 50–90; and Elizabeth Wilson, "The Invisible Flâneur," *New Left Review* 191 (1992): 90–110.

interpretation for women's literary and artistic contributions to Western modernism and urban culture.[8]

In *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses* I build on such new models and contribute to the feminist debate on the gender of urban modernism, as well noted by several reviewers.[9] The inquiry starts with an earlier period than the 1850s because the flâneur had already become a myth and celebrated persona in the rising consumer society of early and mid-nineteenth-century Paris and London.[10] *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses* undertakes a gendered interpretation of the flâneur figure at the onset of the visual and print media revolution of the 1830s and 1840s through discussions of the metropolitan sketches of the 1830s–1840s (Part I), Balzac's Parisian novels (Part II), and works by women writers (Parts III–V). Starting with the wandering flâneur and leisured city observer, the book focuses next on three "invisible flâneuses," to use Janet Wolff's coining: feuilleton writer Delphine de Girardin as travestied dandy and journalist of the daily press; George Sand as artist of modern life and voice of the working classes; and Flora Tristan as social citizen, migrant woman, and pioneering sociologist. Through their astute explorations of their urban surroundings and social actors, these three writers, journalists, and activists questioned gender power relations and women's exclusion from full participation in the erotic, intellectual, and social freedom of modern life.

In her review for *H-France*, Denise Z. Davidson wrote a most insightful and thorough review, demonstrating her expertise in modern urban studies, feminist scholarship, and social theory as well as literary studies. She criticized important omissions, which was an appropriate criticism given my attempt to make my inquiry as historically and sociologically rigorous as possible—although historians and sociologists were not my primary audience. On the one hand, she pointed out that references to David Harvey's *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (2003) would have helped "ground [my] literary analysis of flâneurs and flâneuses more in the lived reality of early nineteenth-century urban dwellers."[11] On the other hand, she expressed her disappointment at my

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[8] See, for example, Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping. Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Deborah E. Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets. Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk. Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis. Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

[9] See for example the reviews of Nicholas White, *Journal of European Studies* 38 (2008): 452–454; Olivier Got, *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* 82 (2008): 340–343; Aimée Boutin, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 37 (2009): 139–141; Dorothy Kelly, *L'Esprit Créateur* 49 (Spring 2009): 125; Rachel Mesch, *French Forum* 34 (Winter 2009): 115–117; David Powell, *George Sand Studies* 28 (2009): 91–94; Margaret Waller, *The French Review* 82 (May 2009): 1317–1318; and Laura Colombo, *Studi Francesi* 158 (2009): 407–408.

[10] On this, see Mary Gluck, "The Flâneur and the Aesthetic Appropriation of Urban Culture in Mid-19th-century Paris," *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, no. 5 (2003): 53–80; and *Popular Bohemia. Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-century Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). Also Martina Lauster, *Sketches of the Nineteenth-Century: European Journalism and Its Physiologies, 1830–50* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[11] Denise Z. Davidson, review of *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses*, by Catherine Nesci, in *H-France Review* 8 (2008), no. 121, p. 489, accessed April 24, 2015, http://www.h-france.net/vol8reviews/vol8no121davidson.pdf.

lack of engagement with "recent historical literature on the self" (p. 489), such as Carla Hesse's *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women became Modern* and Jan Goldstein's *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850*.[12] When she showed that my scholarship did fall short on these two counts, Davidson also proved how truly skilled she is at speaking to several audiences: she masters equally well the scholarly approaches typical of literary and historical studies; she also knows the evaluative criteria and methods integral to women and gender studies. Having such multifaceted talent is indeed necessary when reviewing a book that may have multiple audiences, particularly when the goal of the reviewer is to enrich scholarly debates between historians and literary scholars, rather than exhibit one's own knowledge. Historian Benoît Lenoble reached the same dialogical goal when writing for *Revue d'Histoire du XIXe siècle*; he criticized the weak treatment of the "visibilité et [...] publicités concrètes de la femme dans la ville et l'espace public," which, in his opinion, would have enriched the relevance of my literary analyses.[13]

A similar balance between apt translation for other readers and well-founded, thoughtful criticism appeared in Valérie Stiénon's review for *Fabula*.[14] Like *H-France*, the online portal *Fabula* offers its reviewers quality space for their evaluation and opportunities to assess the state of scholarship in a particular field or sub-field; as a result reviews are most often thorough while including compelling critiques. When she regretted that I did not propose a more historicized and critical approach to Benjamin's work on the flâneur figure, Stiénon pointed to my own lack of scrutiny regarding theoretical presuppositions and to the need for a revisionist perspective in that regard. Along with Martina Lauster's *Sketches of the Nineteenth-Century* (2007) and the work of other scholars, Stiénon herself has helped advance scholarship on the ethnographic literature of the early nineteenth century.[15] Recent research has indeed given such "low" literature more cognitive value than Benjamin did in his work on Baudelaire and print media. Additional substantial critiques by Stiénon addressed the eclectic nature of the corpus I had selected and the variety of social and literary discourses it encompassed, which she saw as insufficiently scrutinized from the viewpoints of discursive genres and pragmatics. Similar to Davidson and Lenoble, Stiénon also criticized the weak approach of the "spécificités du rapport des femmes à la ville." Although I thought I had addressed the issue with sufficient rigor and depth, the triple critique by specialists in nineteenth-century studies gave me pause and, again, pushed me to self-analysis and questioning. Finally, and again from the viewpoint of methodology, Stiénon judged harshly the confusion "entre les trajectoires objectivables des trois femmes écrivains et les figures de flâneuses développées dans leurs œuvres." As she understood it, the conceptual tool of the flâneuse fosters "confusion" because of its dual use as "sociocultural type and metaphor." Here Stiénon may have walked a fine line between legitimate criticism and a less justifiable

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[12] Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[13] Benoît Lenoble, *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 37 (2008): 185–242, p. 220, accessed April 24, 2015, http://rh19.revues.org/3543.

[14] Valérie Stiénon, "L'invention de la flânerie au féminin." *Acta fabula* 9, no. 2 (February 2008), accessed April 26, 2015, http://www.fabula.org/revue/document3925.php.

[15] Valérie Stiénon, *La Littérature des Physiologies: sociopoétique d'un genre panoramique (1830-1845)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012).

claim, in which reviewers, myself included, often indulge when judging a book not as it is written but as we imagined it should have been written, or even we would have written it. However, after reading works on "posture littéraire" (such as Jérôme Meizoz's *Postures littéraires*), I did understand much better Stiénon's criticism, which I see as legitimate because it stems from a careful examination and a rigorous expertise in several fields of inquiry—sociopoetics, pragmatics, and communication, in addition to literary history and theory as well as philosophy and history of ideas.[16]

An altogether different kind of "translation" was done for a comparatist audience by Portuguese scholar Helena Buescu, who conducted her evaluation in a manner more closely aligned with my own research and conceptual framework. Informed by the multilayered critical theory of urban modernist civilization in the German tradition, she added valuable advice by referring to the work of Georg Simmel, which I had neglected, and suggested a more comprehensive use of Simmel's essays on modern urban life so as to enhance the intellectual scope of my inquiry.[17] And this is exactly what I am currently doing in preparing the sequel to the 2007 book. I am thus thankful to Buescu for her thorough assessment of the effectiveness of my inquiry, and also for the reminder to give more weight to Michel de Certeau's work on the "invention du quotidien."

Reflecting now back on over thirty years of evaluations in all forms and kinds and a regular practice of public or occluded academic review genres, from books reviews to the assessment of blind submissions, I still feel the same intellectual curiosity for another colleague's work and a keen sense of responsibility in my role as book reviewer and stand-in for other readers in my field. When evaluating a colleague's book and engaging with its argument I have learned to respect better the author's intention and think more self-consciously about my mediating role between author and the intended audience of the book. I have also been considering the intended audience of my own review as methodologies and topics of inquiry in my own fields have evolved; while new dialogues have emerged between disciplines, it has become more challenging to establish relevant evaluative criteria or standards.

One final word: I wish I had been trained earlier in such an evaluative exercise and very much regret my own instances of failure as a book reviewer, mainly when I submitted a late review or even failed to write one. So to my junior colleagues, I would say that, first and foremost, only accept reviews that you can complete on time, with care and fairness.

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[16] Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures littéraires: mises en scène modernes de l'auteur* (Genève: Slatkine, 2007).

[17] Helena Buescu, *Orbis Literarum* 64 (2009), 76–78.

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