Cluster Editor's Introduction

From Oulipo to al-Ṣafadī: Fault, the absurd, parody and error in medieval and early modern literature

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Bringing together scholars of Latin, Iberian, Italian, French, English and Arabic literatures, this issue contributes to the analysis of fault, error, parody and the absurd in medieval and early modern studies. It also participates in the theoretical dialogue on literature, history, music and art – via Nietzsche, Heidegger, Husserl, Bergson and Deleuze as well as Jean-Luc Nancy, Michel Serres, Bruno Latour and Quentin Meillassoux – centered on historiography, poetics, race studies and research methods. The essays link premodern and contemporary literature and the arts: Oulipo, conceptual poetry, J.M. Coetzee, Gabriel Josipovici, Osip Mandelstam.

The issue originated in sessions co-organized by Nicola Masciandaro (Brooklyn College, CUNY) and me at the 2010 International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, and the 2010 biennial meeting of the BABEL Working Group at the University of Texas, Austin. The topic was motivated by the focus on error in the last decade in major publications by scholars of early modern French and English literatures, discussed in Stephen Murphy's review essay in this issue. Bringing a French studies and early modern optic to *postmedieval*, Murphy situates the five books he reviews by Tom Conley,

Seth Lerer, François Rigolot, Gordon Teskey and Julian Yates in relation to the essential 'canon of early modern error' – '*Orlando furioso* and *Don Quixote* ... with their innumerable variations on the themes of knightly errancy and metaphysical error' – and writers discussed in the five volumes under review: François Rabelais, Erasmus, Petrarch, Pontus de Tyard, Maurice Scève, Pierre de Ronsard, Thomas Nashe, Philip Sidney, John Harington and John Milton. Murphy adds that error, atonement and redemption are also the point of departure of autobiographical writings of Benvenuto Cellini and Agrippa d'Aubigné. And he points out that error is the ontological condition of formal games such as *cento* and parody, essential to political and moral discourse in the early modern period. From Ovid to sixteenth-century French poet Joachim du Bellay, and from Arthur Rimbaud to Stalinist victim Osip Mandelstam, error, erring and exile are the condition – and sometimes also the unbearable price – of poetic illumination.

Murphy's review is essential for anyone who examines error in the poetics of the Renaissance to look for ways to organize our knowledge of premodern culture, to reveal important configurations within that field, and participate in contemporary intellectual and theoretical dialogue. The twentieth century seemed to pay special attention to the role of error, randomness and fault. This resulted in a body of work in disciplines ranging from philosophy to finance to physics, on truth, estimation, speculation and the uncertainty principle. Interest in fault in the broadest sense – error, dissonance, the absurd, parody, collage – connected new thought and practice in the arts, from Dada, Surrealism, Oulipo, *théâtre de l'absurde*, the *Nouveau Roman* and its visual arts equivalent *Support-Surface*, to music and cinema. Engaging with the notion of fault can be a means of testing the limits of logic or symmetry – error, fault line – and amplifying the tension between material limitations and the conceptual in art, from Renaissance *sprezzatura* (a generalized term for brilliance borrowed from the vocabulary of wet fresco painting, where in the early modern period a painter's ability was judged by the amount of surface he covered per day) to Andy Goldsworthy's landscape sculptures balanced on the edge of feasibility – and sometimes falling off it. Fault was studied as a cultural construct by Michel Foucault and Georges Canguilhem in their work on the normal and the pathological, which paid special attention to the reification of adjectives. Fault has been an important interest in such vastly different fields as psychoanalysis (Lacan's lack) and mathematics (valuation). Both scientific theory and literary criticism have been guided by fault-based methods: finding a fulcrum from which a well-known territory can be tilted so that it is made unfamiliar and thus more fully knowable; this can be said of approaches usually considered incompatible, for instance the work of Foucault and deconstruction.

It is well acknowledged that fault can lead to radical innovation. That version of the 'myth of origins' of inventions is so prevalent that almost everyone knows more examples of inventions due to felicitous errors, from aniline dyes to

super-capacitors, from penicillin to post-it notes, than of any other scenario of creation. The creative process both deliberately and instinctively courts fault. It is an established practice to allow and even to require people to follow random interests, rather than pursuing an already established goal, in circumstances and institutional settings ranging from fundamental research to engineering.

Along these lines, we open the issue with an invitation to contribute to 'Fumblr: The Academic Failblog' by Asa Simon Mittman and Shyama Rajendran. As they say, 'the silence surrounding the conversation about the processes inherent in scholarship and in learning to teach does a disservice to graduate students and early career scholars, prioritizing product over discovery. If we are serious about experimental approaches and risk taking, we have to be prepared to fail, at least on occasion.' They point to the sciences, where results of failed experiments are published so that others may learn from them. And, as their sampling shows, *Fumblr* is as entertaining as it is instructive.

The further essays collected here under the umbrella of fault show different aspects of this notion in the context of premodern literature and contemporary thought. Chris Piuma's essay on twenty-first-century conceptual poetry and ninth-century Latin poetry of mourning allows us to imagine more fully, generously and vividly a medieval genre that even great critics like Ernst Curtius have dismissed, and by that dismissal doubly relegated to the proverbial obscurity of the 'Dark Ages.' Piuma shows that we can improve on Curtius's reading in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1953), where he says of Agius of Corvey's consolation poem on the death of the Abbess Hathumod, including long litanies of names: 'It takes him over a hundred lines (*Poetae*, III, 377, 229 ff.). Laudable industry! But hardly a "touching lament," as it has been called' (Curtius, 1953, 80–81). To the contrary, Piuma shows that a litany of names can be touching, even foundering.

Brian Macaskill takes a similar approach to bring out the qualities of Guillaume de Machaut's famous rondeau 'My end is my beginning and my beginning, my end,' by putting Machaut's infinite loop poem/song in resonance with other examples of various symmetries – graphic, mathematical, literary – organized as loops, usually with a center (as in the Möbius strip) or 'fault line.' Some of Macaskill's examples, like the recycling sign, are ubiquitous and yet, as his narrative reveals, the details of their genesis are not well known. Macaskill's article itself is constructed as a loop around a fault line, with secondary symmetries (columns). The article presents a graphic and conceptual challenge: it is a puzzle and an experiment in the mimicry of content by form.

Heather Bamford's analysis of early modern manuscript collections of documents (letters, deeds), some related to the 'Altercations of Aragon' (1590s), assembled by early modern historians, shows that history, no matter how recent, is impossible to write. The point of view of the observer switches and remains elusive even within the same letter; as if to mirror this past unavailability in the present, the book's presence withdraws in proportion to the very attempts

(taking notes, transcribing excerpts, checking the text against other sources) undertaken by the scholar who wishes to comprehend it. Paradoxically, the more we work around it, the less present to the book, literally, we are. To write history is to accept that we cannot eliminate error, partiality, political manipulation and inconsistency. There is no such thing as historical truth. What we have, instead, is a choice, explicit or unconscious, of different ways to write history. Bamford's essay demonstrates that early modern historians struggled with and sometimes appeared quite as aware of this methodological bind as we do, and she shows in detail what strategies, explicit and implicit, they used in search of greater relevance and authenticity.

Bamford's theme – fallacies of linear historical time and historiography – applies to fiction writing as well. Wan-Chuan Kao's piece on Geoffrey Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* centers on fallacies of linear time and space in fictional memorializing. Unlike Piuma's ninth-century *consolatio*, Chaucer's *tumulus* is to a literary lady; its characters, Black and White. Bamford shows that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century codices have to abandon linear time organization, at some points stretching like an accordion to accommodate multiple individual points of view, forcing these purportedly historical collections to default to organizing history 'by individual,' paradoxically, when they most strive for objective, authentic documentation. This resonates with Kao's discussion of the work of memory in the *Book of the Duchess*, which he presents as a series of folds, a topology of time as Michel Serres describes it: 'unlike geometry and linear time, topology is time that is multiple, crumpling, and foldable: time is a handkerchief on which any two points can be spread out far apart by stretching or be superimposed by crumpling' (Serres and Latour, 1995, 60).

The essay cluster ends with Kelly Tuttle's article on Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī's parodic commentary, *Invention of Absurdity*, adding a much needed Arabic dimension to our knowledge of fourteenth-century literary cultures. The *Invention of Absurdity* is a fictional commentary on two lines of nonsense verse. It constitutes an avatar, or rather, as Piuma and the literary collective Oulipo would call it, an 'anticipatory plagiarism,' as 'when someone steals your idea and publishes it centuries before you were born.' Al-Ṣafadī anticipates Borges's pseudo-philology (as in his short story 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*') and conceptual movements such as Oulipo. His *Invention* is a parody that deploys a mixture of doctored facts to amuse an erudite audience. He ridicules literary criticism by constructing irreproachably reasoned and superbly researched arguments that lead to absurd conclusions. Tuttle contends that the *Invention* is a critique of superficial commentaries satisfied with name-dropping, listing a profusion of learned but superficial facts. The errors of the absurd commentary are as entertaining as a serious commentary would be, and al-Ṣafadī's fame is based in part on this parodic work. The *Invention of Absurdity* is, to cadge from Piuma, a paleo-garde of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

The essays collected here offer some unexpected connections, for instance by confirming that topology and the concept of the fold are an apt way to flesh out (not preempt or resolve, but instead extend to its full potential) the thinking on fault and paradox. Second, it seems that the vocabularies and fictionalizations of fault (Chaucer's *defaute*), consolation, memorialization and subjectivity bear some additional strong relation to one other. These essays as a collection reveal a particular mutual traction or stickiness within the subject of fault that may not be as readily identifiable from within each separate piece (history, song, poetry of mourning, poetic fiction, parody). The theme of consolation in particular emerges as a special poetic register of error. Poetic illumination redeems or even rewards that which in the human condition constitutes the blackest grounds of despair: death, suffering, torture, exile. Finally, all the authors, and Murphy, Piuma, Macaskill and Bamford with particular deliberateness, show that premodern writing was not some simpler version of the present, with regards to its complexity (historiography and its challenges), intensity (*consolatio*) or conceptual and formalist ambitions (*rondeau*). Although we probably could put on every medievalist's tombstone: 'Tried and failed to dispel stereotypes about the Middle Ages,' these essays show the relevance of medieval and early modern studies to a wide and inclusive audience.

About the Author

Anna Kłosowska is Professor of French at Miami University and author of books and articles on medieval and early modern literature, including *Queer Love in the Middle Ages* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). She has published an edition of the poetry of the late sixteenth-century poet Madeleine de l'Aubespine, *Selected Poems and Translations* (Chicago, 2007), and is currently at work on an intellectual history of l'Aubespine and her circle (E-mail: roberta2@miamioh.edu).

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