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The Ways We Pay Attention

Patricia Clare Ingham

Abstract: This essay brings the intellectual history of curiosity into current debates about critique and postcritique. I argue that these methodological debates founder on issues of attention, and can productively be understood via persistent features in the ways we as critics, scholars, students, and readers pay attention, taking curiosity as an apt concept to discuss such features.

I. Postcritical, Present Tense

REPORTS OF THE DEATH OF CRITIQUE HAVE been greatly exaggerated. If the first decades of the twenty-first century announced a newish “postcritical” moment, the future of such claims seems now less sure. Reconsiderations—and reconsiderations of those reconsiderations—are urged upon us, recently demonstrated by various responses to John Guillory’s new book *Professing Criticism*.¹ In the first instance, postcritique ushered in a set of debates pertaining (or so the story went) to the exhausted explanatory power of history or of ideology critique. Prosecuting the case against what he called the “debunking” brands of scholarship in 2004, Bruno Latour pointedly asked what it meant that “critique” had “run out of steam.”² Might we, he asked, “devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals *this time* with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care, as Donna Haraway would put it?”³ On the one hand, a focus on “matters of concern” was and remains a perennial, well, matter of concern. On the other, Latour’s “*this time*” narrates disciplinary shift as temporal development: he announces a new approach with the power to freshen worn-out methods. It was, at the time, both provocative and controversial.

Nowadays such debates show their own signs of exhaustion. The all-too-familiar antinomies of critique vs. postcritique; surface vs. symptom; or even, in Rita Felski’s salutary framing, enchantment vs. disenchantment, seem more in danger of eliciting boredom than either outrage or

excitement.⁴ And this seems true even as we have learned much along the way, and even as the problems that such debates were working to solve (the loss of critical liveliness; the too-predictable forms under which critical writing proceeds; a continued commitment to things that matter) remain salient. If Latour's opposition of "matters of concern" to critique seemed commonsensical at the time of writing, it perhaps no longer does so; arguments based in critique often announce their purpose with precisely the aims of care and concern in mind. Rather than opposing these approaches, they suggest that we might reframe the entire question as one of what matters are deemed to merit our attention. Still, the fact that critique seemed to "run out of steam" needs addressing, and I wish to suggest that it might best be understood differently than Latour does: not as an historical event or as a problem of critical method, but as a function of the vicissitudes of attention. This is less a matter of divergent methodological fashions than it is a set of problems related to cognition and curiosity, whether then or now.

This essay will argue, accordingly, that the methodological debates regularly staged over the past decades as historical shifts in practice—of interventions in time, of new methods and fresh approaches—both allude to and avoid persistent problems of the quite complex processes whereby critics, scholars, students, and readers pay attention to texts and objects. Rather than simply heralding or contesting a new method for critics to adopt, the so-called "method wars" circle persistent features of the processes and pitfalls of *curiosity*, itself long associated with the ethics of care and concern. A term with a long and unruly history, curiosity alludes to the complex oscillations and dynamisms of attention and attentiveness that perplex us now: enchantment vs. boredom; absorption vs. distraction; promiscuous vs. studious care. Historically articulated as at once a cognitive, affective, and ethical phenomenon, curiosity's history can shed crucial light on the difficulties of attention itself—how we pay it, how we sustain it, and the nature of its benefits and liabilities. As we shall see, curiosity encodes an array of surprisingly relevant features able to shift some of the terms of these debates.

II. The Trouble with Attention

The category of attention has been important to postcritical accounts of method at least since Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's 2009 "Surface Reading: An Introduction."⁵ In sympathy with Latour's impatience with "ideological demystification," they situate surface reading as "the best way to move past the impasses" created by "symptomatic" reading methods

(SR 18–19). Their methodological recommendations regularly turn on questions of attention. Surface reading offers, in this view, a salutary commitment to open attention to the text, presuming an attitude of “true openness to all the potentials made available by texts” (SR 16). Such openness, moreover, is the “prerequisite to attentiveness” which, they also claim, offers “the best way to say anything accurate and true” (SR 16). As this makes clear, the attentiveness that comes from “true” openness is understood to grant not unintentional errors or lapses in recognition, but special claims to wisdom and accuracy.

This picture of attentiveness depends upon an opposition to the “selectiv[e]” attention of the (symptomatic) reader who brings a theoretical framework to the readerly task (SR 17). The problems of the symptomatic reader, accordingly, stem from this habit of selectivity; the attention they pay to the text is understood as limited (or blinkered?) by outside influences. And whereas open attention, for Best and Marcus, constitutes “itself a kind of freedom” (thereby seeming to assume that textual “truth” and readerly “freedom” will regularly coincide), the selective attention of symptomatic readers marks “freedom . . . [as] an agon with the ideological text” (SR 16, 15). The latter aims not at accuracy but at self-assertion: at “the evaluative energy . . . considered the hallmar[k] of good criticism” (SR 17).

As many others have pointed out, the contrast between these two modes is overdrawn.⁶ I wish to stress that in conjuring a “surface” reader with a seemingly limitless capacity to read a text in “all [its] potentials,” Best and Marcus indulge in an impossible account of cognition particularly as it pertains to the mechanics of reading. Despite the importance of attention (and attentiveness) in this new method, there are here many naive assumptions about what it means to pay attention to texts, and the capacity of attention itself to register a text’s full potential.

In privileging the open attention of surface reading, Best and Marcus follow a tradition—from Augustine of Hippo onwards—whereby readerly receptivity is prized. And yet, this same tradition also persistently raises receptivity’s potential problem: the disabling power of *too much* openness: to a dangerous image, to an overly fanciful text, or (most recently) to the manipulations of digital media. Medieval moralists (like nineteenth-century critics of women’s special appetite for novels) worry precisely about the problems that overly fanciful texts pose to readers—in which case too much readerly receptivity is a problem. Too much receptivity also emerges as a problem of attention in the recent contrast between “deep attention” and “hyper attention” found in the work of N. Katherine Hayles.⁷ Differences in the digital habits across the generations constitute a kind of difficult “digital divide” for Hayles: a conflict emerges between

the apparently scholarly habits of deep attention and our apparently hyperattentive students. Such concerns have been corroborated in cognitive studies tracking how, for example, our iPhones—programmed to reward us with “likes” and retweets for attending to them; programmed as well to remind us, should our attention wander, to gaze again on their tiny screens—rewire our brains, from the pleasure centers to capacities for spatial orientation, observation, or memory.

As this suggests, defining attentiveness as openness begs nearly all of the cognitive questions associated with attention itself: its deficits, its potential blindnesses, or the problems and pleasures of distraction. (Not coincidentally, Best and Marcus allude to some of these problems. Their descriptions of attention occasionally gesture toward its potential problems: as “fixed” or “fasten[ed]” [SR 18, 9]; attention can, as they allow, be difficult. Surface readers might find the “slow pace, receptiveness, and fixed attention” of the method “both difficult and discomfiting” [SR 18].) Cognitive scientists and reading education specialists, for their part, have long taught us that human attention is always and necessarily selective. In fact, in cognitive science, attention is the process by which humans both “*choose* and concentrate on relevant stimuli” (emphasis mine).⁸ Just as the brain silently screens out certain things it judges to be distractions, it fills in potential gaps in sensory processing in ways that accord with cognitive patterns, aims, and habits, conscious as well as pre-conscious. This point about attention may seem a bit too literal, too concerned with automatic processes below the level of conscious intent. But this is precisely the point. No amount of conscious “openness” to textual surfaces—intentional or otherwise—can compensate for the challenges (physical, psychic, contextual, ocular, or linguistic) that the waxing and waning of attention pose to focused intellectual work. Furthermore, even when focusing attention intently on the literal text, readers and writers regularly overlook details, misread or misconstrue, mistakenly skip lines (the problem of scribal eye-skips in textual copying is famous), or make errors of identification. We know this as much from experience as from cognitive research. (It’s one reason we are so grateful to our copy editors.) In this context, Best and Marcus’s essay offers a doubly paradoxical account: surface reading is imagined as both self-effacingly open and determinedly focused on accuracy and truth; its habits of attention are characterized as free but never distracted.

Critics such as David Kurnick have pointed to ways that Best and Marcus’s rhetoric of attention prompts a moralizing tone. Kurnick demonstrates the ways that surface reading avoids attention to certain critical exigencies, namely the legacies of queer theory precisely as a form of critique. As Kurnick brilliantly argues, this leads to an implicitly

gendered and characterological story, whereby a feminized (good kind of) readerly openness remains resolutely opposed to a masculine (and bad) “masterful” and “aggressive” style (AFL 358). Analyzing rhetorical features of Best and Marcus’s essay alongside those of Felski and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Kurnick argues that postcritical writings often offer less by way of interpretive method than as a series of “vehemently, even melodramatically binarized” “character sketches” (AFL 351). Specifically, he notes that the moralized antinomies surrounding “attention” in Best and Marcus’s essay demonstrate a “sentimentalized psychology [that] underwrites surface reading” overall (AFL 360). The positions are “morally overdetermined”: “It’s easy to see on which side we are expected to line up” (AFL 358–9). In his essay’s final moments, Kurnick diagnoses how these overdeterminations result from an *inattention* to critical history; this, he points out, proves particularly disabling, given the exigencies of our current moment. We “should be wary,” he concludes of “introjecting a rhetoric that offers an impoverished account of what it means to pay attention to texts, a disavowal of the ways aggression and affection and much else can be bound up in any serious reading” (AFL 369).

I would go further. The vagaries of attention and inattention legible here constitute a crucial intellectual, affective, and *ethical* vector that this debate has in key ways both stipulated and avoided. We are headed toward an account of some persistent cognitive and affective dilemmas, as yet unsolved, that can be shown to circulate under the name of “curiosity” and its vicissitudes. Attention, often difficult and discomfiting, converges on problems of focus, on distraction, on boredom. All of these interwoven topics converge in the intellectual history of curiosity. Further, the sentimentality that Kurnick identifies in the current case represents, among other things, one side of a long debate about the ethics of curiosity precisely as a means of paying proper attention to the right kinds of things. In view of the insights gleaned from this history, attention is, to paraphrase Bertrand Russell, the name of a problem.⁹

I seek to offer a more capacious account of what it means to pay attention—to the texts we read or for our work more generally. In fact, traditions concerning attention as a feature of curiosity can help us to see why we might have expected the persistently moralizing tone of the so-called “method wars.”¹⁰ Questions of attention as distraction, absorption, and/or boredom go back many centuries. And in the context of Latour’s ascription of a scholarly exhaustion prompted by deadened habits, we might ask the following questions: What do deadened habits or boredom (both synonyms for “running out of steam”) have to do with the attention that grants accuracy, that enlivens reading, analysis, writing, or critique? How and when does the problem of a too-fixed

attention converge with the kind of inattention that Kurnick helpfully identifies? And, most precisely, what difference would it make to conceive of the oscillations of attention and inattention, of fascination and boredom, as near neighbors rather than opposed forces? Might boredom itself—whether understood as “running out of steam,” or as acts of inattention—be interior to the structure of attention rather than outside of and opposed to it? As we shall see, critical habits of attention converge on the vicissitudes of curiosity as a question of care—caring about as well as caring for.

III. *Cura* > *Curiosos* > Curiosity

My main intervention here is to demonstrate the various ways that postcritical debates might benefit from an engagement with the history of curiosity as an ethical and cognitive function. I hope to redirect overdetermined oppositions of openness vs. mastery and boredom vs. attentiveness by assessing the quirky history of curiosity as a category engaged with what Adam Phillips calls “being interested.”¹¹ I am interested, that is, in curiosity as a question of interest. This also means that I am, accordingly, interested in the problem of being *uninterested*, in being bored, not as the opposite of curiosity but as a feature of it. Throughout its long history, curiosity is a good deal less *polemically* articulated than either symptomatic reading or openness to surfaces. It is this ambivalent, polymorphous feature of curiosity that seems useful to me so as to dislodge these familiar, indeed potentially merely boring, antinomies.

Both open interest and being bored have been features of the discourse of curiosity from its earliest days. It is on account of this push and pull that the Canadian writer Alberto Manguel opens his 2015 monograph with the statement, “Curiosity is a word with a double meaning.”¹² Manguel’s literary essays range widely, taking examples from Dante Alighieri to Gertrude Stein, offering excursions into kinds of curiosity articulated in texts from the *Commedia* to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The title of his book stakes his interest in the topic with the simple declarative *Curiosity*, as if it were, indeed, a single thing; yet the diverse essayistic chapters organize around a divergent series of interrogatives: from “What Do We Want to Know?” to “How Do We Question?”; from “Who Am I?” to “What Comes Next?” As the structure of Manguel’s book suggests, curiosity’s long doubled history sits in uneasy relation to curiosity as a multiply dynamic, polymorphous phenomenon.

Take Plato’s story of the ancient Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletus, a figure regarded as the founder of the study of natural philosophy.

In *Theaetetus*, Socrates relates the story that the philosopher Thales was so intent upon watching the stars that he failed to watch where he was walking and fell into a well.¹³ This story will be used, as Hans Blumenberg and others have noted, to suggest the ways that wonder at the world might occasion errors of attention. Cicero, credited with coining the term “curiosus,” cites the moral of the story of Thales twice in that context, as an example of the complexities of attention. Close attention in one direction apparently begets neglect in another: “No one regards the things before his feet / But views with care the regions of the sky.”¹⁴ By the sixteenth century, the story of Thales would circulate as a joke about the scholar with his head in the clouds, as it does in the 1526 *The Hundred Merry Tales*, where it emerges as a classic case of so-called “Ivory Tower” blindness. The philosopher, “fell plumpe into a ditche over the eares. Wherefore an olde woman that he kepte in his house laughed and sayde to him in derision: O Thales, how shuldest thou have knowlege in hevenly things above, and knowest nat what is here benethe vnder thy feet?”¹⁵ The gendered contrast between the starry-eyed speculative philosopher and the wisely pragmatic housekeeper suggests the emergence of a tradition we might recognize, one that regularly associates speculative soaring with male curiosity and mundane pragmatism with women’s. In its gendering moves, the sixteenth-century joke splits the curious case in two. Male speculation emerges here in opposition to the mundanities of the everyday, even if, in this case, the joke is on the philosopher and not the impatient housekeeper. (One might be forgiven for wondering whether the gendering here offers a deep history of Best and Marcus’s gendered rhetoric of masculine “mastery” and feminized “attention” [SR 8, 11].) The anecdote can be read to insist upon the incommensurability of two kinds of attention: one, upward, deep, heavenly; the other downward, quotidian, under our feet.

We might note, however, that in Plato’s and Cicero’s original formulations, the important question of the two kinds of attention together remains at issue: “No one regards the things before his feet / But views with care the regions of the sky.” The point here concerns serious problems of attention: when must we locate our concerns in the heavens and when on the ground? Might there be ways of toggling between the two? How might curious speculation make room for more mundane matters (or vice versa)? The larger question involves interest as well as investments: what are worthy *objects* of attention, and how variously can attention to them be paid?: When do enthusiasms outstrip necessity? And which, earth or sky, grants the more important, or comprehensive, perspective?

This kind of doubleness emerges regularly in accounts of curiosity as an unruly concept. Critiques of curiosity throughout the Middle Ages sometimes address attention as a quantitative question: “bad” curiosity is too open to too many things. On the one hand, this sometimes means paying too *much* attention to what we or others are doing; alternately, the openness of bad curiosity is vapid, mindless, attending too *little* to what is before us; sometimes both. In many of the examples of bad curiosity, as with the medieval association of curiosity with aping and the ape, problems with attention are imagined as disordered, inert, or unnatural kinds of imitation or repetition.¹⁶ Curious aping, accordingly, was associated with empty prayer or liturgical performance, an unfocused mind and body automatically going through the motions. At the same time, it registered as critique of a gossipy interest in somebody else’s business, or an overly busy preoccupation with every new fashion. To be sure, for all its critical power, the tradition of aping curiosity includes its fair share of delights, as with the children’s stories about Curious George, the monkey whose aping of human activities gets him into a series of hilarious if seemingly never-ending scrapes.

The creation of Margaret and H. A. Rey, Curious George first appeared in 1941 as, in editor Leonard S. Marcus’s words, the “[q]uintessential childhood tale of monkeyshines and mischief was the creation of a wartime refugees who knew, better than George himself, what it means to escape danger by the seat of one’s pants.”¹⁷ The colonial and racialized implications of the *Curious George* tradition have been subject to critique, a body of work elegantly contextualized by Rivka Galchen.¹⁸

Curious George acts in ways both derivative of humans—aping the actions of his friend, the Man in the Yellow Hat—and distinct from them. George’s silly jokes hinge on the charming monkey’s category mistakes. Whether trying to fly by imitating seagulls, or mimicking the Man’s telephone call, George lands predictably and repeatedly in trouble. The inexhaustible multiplicity of *Curious George*’s episodic plot lines demonstrates a third feature of the larger discourse: one key node of “curiosity’s danger,” as medievalist Anke Bernau puts it, involves this “protean, infinite, open-ended capacity for engagement that can eschew moral frameworks.”¹⁹ George can’t stop finding new acts to imitate. And if such diversity drove the success of the children’s book series, it also alludes to a definition of curiosity as a problem about too muchness: too much attention, in too many, varied directions; too much repetition, in inappropriate ways.

As a vice, curiosity could, accordingly, be associated with a number of the capital vices (pride, avarice, or gluttony, for example). Bernau writes, “Because objects of interest are finally a means to an end—the

end lying in the ‘acquisition’ of the object rather than any necessary worthiness of the object—curiosity reveals the ravenous drive of desire. It is unsurprising that moralists often linked it to Avarice (although it was also linked to many of the other major sins, particularly Pride and Sloth).²⁰ Yet the question of curiosity as a *qualitative* question of interest was also a tricky one. Beginning with Augustine, the “first great theoretician of curiosity,”²¹ and mobilized by thinkers—most especially including twelfth-century intellectual and moralist Bernard of Clairvaux—curiosity suggests that the matter of our interest involves deeply ethical concerns: How, by managing the qualities and quantities of our attention, might one achieve focused interest without diffuse distraction? How can the devout subject engage desire without polymorphous restlessness? Bernard aims for moderation and balance: on the one hand, he critiques *curious* ornamentation in his monastic context—specifically the carvings of grotesques in the cloister—for their capacity to promote “restlessness” and “inquietude” by stirring “strong desire,” and yet he also demonstrates, as Mary Carruthers points out, that such incitements “are not . . . always bad” since they serve as “the antidote” to a deadening tedium.²² This doubleness is crucial. Bernard worries about attention deficits in two directions: flighty exuberance on the one hand, and slack-jawed repetition on the other. He is equally concerned with the dangers of a wandering eye or pen as he is with the bad kind of *mindlessness*, unfocused boredom that threatens cognition, contemplation, and reading. Bernard cannot simply eschew inert imitation or repetition especially because repetition (physical, linguistic, liturgical) remains crucial to the power of Benedictine rule, and thus to monastic life in Bernard’s context. Whether in the scriptorium, in the field, or in the chapel, monks must evince a willingness to stay focused on one thing for hours at a time; they must risk the possibility of boredom for a greater purpose. The problem is precisely the difficulty of managing a blend of qualities and quantities of attention. The pertinences to research and writing seem obvious.

Bernard’s account of ornamentation and distraction suggests something of the ethics with which curiosity has long been associated. The etymological links of *cura* (or care) and curiosity were important to Cicero’s coinage of the term *curiosus*. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas developed accounts of curiosity and its vicissitudes as related to questions of care, caring for, as well as caring about. Etymological links between curiosity and care produced wide-ranging debates in which the vice of curiosity (*vitium curiositatis*) emerged as a misplaced kind of caring. To translate this to a more current idiom of interest: this is interest in the wrong things, excessive interest in too many things, or insufficient interest in things that matter. Cautions were raised against

taking too great an interest in relatively inconsequential matters, or in devoting too much time to unworthy or self-serving intellectual pursuits. Medieval thinkers, accordingly, marked excesses by way of gradations of curiosity, assessing differences among *bona*, *mala*, or *media curiositas*.²³ Whether as a quantitative question of excessive interest or a qualitative judgement about fascination with trivial things, curiosity registered as a problem of caring: sometimes too much; sometimes too little; sometimes about the wrong things.

There are, as the foregoing suggests, two implications to this problem: on the one hand, the kind of infinite open attention to everything—the very kind of attention that Best and Marcus privilege—risks a focus on trivial rather than important matters. On the other hand, the temptation to avoid diligent attention to what feel like trivial and boring things is also a problem. (This might be one way to construe Thales's problem, after all. It wasn't that the stars were trivial objects of interest; it was that, in his enthusiasm for the stars, he forgot to attend to the boring task of walking on the earth, a problem that proved disabling for his bodily safety as well as his curious attention.) As writers and readers well recognize, sometimes curiosity requires not a flight from boredom but a capacity to stay in it—as those monks were urged to stay engaged with the repetitive Liturgy of the Hours. Attending to boring details can ultimately serve curiosity; it can promote, ground, and extend interest in powerful ways.

The great medieval systematizer, Thomas Aquinas, attempted to solve this particular conundrum by way of one of his typically fine distinctions: he coined a term for the right amount of the proper kind of attention, *studiositas*, that is, diligent and productive uses of reason; *studiositas* was, accordingly, cordoned off from *curiositas*, the latter becoming, in his wake, identical with only one part of its definition. *Vitium curiositatis* (or the vice of curiosity) would, accordingly, take force in some quarters as a subset of the problem of restless attention to the wrong things: a synonym for trivial interests, or promiscuous wandering. Aquinas's elegant solution would be satisfying in some ways, but it would not succeed in tamping down the diverse problems associated with curiosity throughout the earlier period and into our own. Aquinas's view would, however, be key to Hans Blumenberg's intellectual history of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, where curiosity serves as the linchpin for epochal change, crucial to his defense of the legitimacy of the notion of modernity.²⁴ In the Middle Ages, Blumenberg avers, privileging Aquinas, curiosity is understood as wasting time: far from being necessary for human happiness, it draws us toward "restless activity" amid "the futility of trying to achieve under [our] own power the lost fullness of . . . existence."²⁵

In the modern epoch, in contrast and thanks (in Blumenberg's view) to writers from Francesco Petrarch to René Descartes, Sigmund Freud to Ludwig Feuerbach, curiosity was "rehabilitated," redirected from its ethically suspect condition as an errant kind of useless promiscuous attention.²⁶ This rehabilitation, for Blumenberg, meant that modern curiosity endorsed speculation, however wild, however unhooked from practical matters, because it could be tested through disciplined experimentations. Understood in this way, curiosity was now able to serve altogether utopian aims, viz. overall improvements in human thriving—a redirection of curiosity back to its etymological links to care. In modernity, Blumenberg accordingly argues, curiosity was transformed into the disciplined pursuit of reasoned and reasonable speculation, particularly the inventive kind of techne now associated with disciplines in the sciences and with technology.

In many ways, Blumenberg tells a compelling story. It certainly helps us, as I have argued elsewhere, understand the association of modernity with innovation as progress through scientific speculation. Furthermore, Blumenberg's story seems to set some of the terms for the debates we face in the contemporary university. It still, shall we say, speaks to central administrators who unrelentingly associate durable (and, not coincidentally, monetizable) innovation with applied science, now ever bigger. Yet Blumenberg's account of speculation, of curiosity as a "theoretical" pursuit, can assist in the defense of "pure science," as well.²⁷

And yet, unhelpfully, Blumenberg (with a few exceptional moments, as in his account of Feuerbach) evens out the history of curiosity such that we have, today, sometimes lost the sense of the difficulties of curiosity as a complex matter of attention. This seems clear from the vantage of one of our most compelling advocates of curiosity, Donna J. Haraway. Haraway, whose work we recall was important to Latour's provocative intervention against critique, elevates curiosity as itself a good able to stitch together ethics and enjoyment. In her account, curiosity is a persistently positive ethical value, a register for care and concern. Haraway links curiosity to care for all kinds of creatures, and to interspecies entanglements precisely as ways of caring about the world, as a key matter of concern. The embedded links between care and curiosity pop up repeatedly in the *When Species Meet*, where she describes (cross-species) curiosity as a "first obligatio[n] and deepest pleasur[e]."²⁸ In this way, Haraway's work on curiosity converges with Best and Marcus's account of attention; and she critiques key theoreticians in Animal Studies (Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze are her primary targets), for their *failures* to be receptive enough to (that is, curious enough about) their objects of study. If this helpfully alludes to the ethical history of curiosity and its vicissitudes, it

doesn't quite account for the difficulties embedded in a category such as "enough": the medieval debates, in contrast, focused on precisely this question. Haraway's optimistic view of curiosity is shared by proponents of "positive psychology" such as Todd Kashdan, who make curiosity central to human cognition and well-being, as in the subtitle to Kashdan's book, "the missing ingredient to a fulfilling life."²⁹ Even so, curiosity remains a word with at least a "double meaning," as Marina Warner and Brian Dillon's curated exhibition at London's Wellcome Library ("Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing") demonstrates. Warner and Dillon note a host of modern contradictions about curiosity, some to do with nineteenth-century doubts about the morality of women's curiosity.³⁰ The question persists: when is attention too little; when is it too much?

Upbeat views of positive curiosity or open attention as the road to freedom presuppose a history whereby the (medieval) problems of curiosity's capacity for misuse have all been solved. The question is complex, more so than the example of Thales at first glance suggests. And it relates to the question of context, and to the exigencies of human life. As unlikely as it may seem, this insight joins medieval accounts of curiosity with psychoanalytic ones. In both, curiosity emerges not as a matter of wildly free speculation, or unfettered open attention, but as a method of response to situational exigencies—whether in texts, in archives, or in families.

IV. Paying Attention with Sigmund Freud

As we have seen, the intricacies of curiosity pertain to complexities of attention: sufficiency or excess; flights of fancy or dullness of focus; speculation, wild or tame; diligent or desultory study; lackadaisical or obsessive cognition. The place of curious attention in the psychoanalytic work of Freud, D. W. Winnicott, and Adam Phillips converges surprisingly on aspects of the question as it emerges in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux: these modern psychoanalytic thinkers, like the medieval monk, all suggest that a productively curious mind or body does not simply follow from freedom of thought—whatever we mean by freedom in that locution. Freud's account of curiosity is spread out across a range of writings; he often addresses the question on the way to an analysis of some other issue, infantile sexuality on the one hand, or Leonardo da Vinci's extraordinary creativity on the other. He may well have rehabilitated a certain kind of self-directed curiosity, as Blumenberg contends, but he did so less on theoretical than on practical, not to say clinical, grounds, as K. Daniel Cho argues. Many theorists of curiosity, from Augustine

and Aquinas onward, begin from the Aristotelian precept that opens the *Metaphysics*: “All men, by nature, desire to know.”³¹ Freud does not. Throughout Freud’s writings, curiosity is complexly linked with specific cases but, and more importantly, with states of anxiety as well as states of defense. “Curiosity is,” as Cho puts it, “always in Freud the ‘product of a vital exigency.’”³² It is, in other words, *motivated* by matters of deep concern. Or, as Phillips notes, Freud sees curiosity (in Phillips’s terms, “interest”) or its absence as prompted by threat, on the one hand, and a desire for safety, on the other.³³

There are, in the Freudian context, two impulses that pertain to the subject’s development of the capacity to be interested in knowledge about the world. The first exigency within which the child develops her curiosity concerns the birth (or the apprehension of the birth) of a sibling. This event is understood to constitute a fundamental threat to the child’s place within the family, and it is to this exigency that the first version of curiosity responds. Significant attention paid to discovering the answer to this question, accordingly, emerges as a defense against the problem of a potential rival. Destabilizing the family romance, the advent of a sibling prompts what Rachel Bowlby wittily terms Freud’s “first first question”: where do babies come from?³⁴

At issue are the power dynamics of the parental relation. The child, curious about the origin of a mysterious new creature, addresses the parents with this perennial question. The parents, shielding the child from the true manner in which babies are conceived and born, tell one or another of a set of wonder tales (featuring, possibly, an enchanting tale about a stork, or a cabbage patch), and about which, Freud notes, children remain inwardly skeptical even as they demonstrate surface compliance. As Bowlby puts it, “Freudian children are passionately curious researchers, *fighting* for knowledge in the face of the shifty evasions of a prejudiced older generation.”³⁵ Curiosity emerges, thus, in this doubled mode: surface delight accompanies skeptical reserve. This is the structure that will continue to mark, in the psychoanalytic understanding, subsequent processes of enlightenment. The truth of the matter is very much at issue.

In the context of my concern with attention, we might note that this is also, in Freud’s description, a refusal of unequivocally open enchantment. The child may well wonder about (in the sense of puzzling over) where this interloper came from; but in Freud’s account, children are much too savvy to be taken in by wonder tales told about babies’ miraculous appearances in garden plots or from flying birds with baskets. Early researchers, they set about trying to determine the truth. For Freud, the ways in which this process proceeds will set the stage for the

subject's later capacity to follow tracks laid by their own curiosity. It will be crucial to the subject's capacity to sustain research even in the face of significant obstacles to knowing the truth. This process will also, moreover, structure the force of Freud's "second first question," the question of sexual difference, also described as underwriting a more instinctual childhood commitment to "research."³⁶

And yet, if curiosity is not, in either case, a simple open, wondrous attention, the exigencies—situational and instinctual—in whose shadow curiosity emerges are also scenes of a deeply eudemonic brand of knowing. Notably, Freud's first version of curiosity blends wonder with critical interest; this kind of curiosity demands less a willingness to be simply open than a process by which openness converges on critical ends: the advent of a rival may prove as astonishing to any child already skeptical of the business about the stork or cabbage patch, as it does to her more credulous peer. In Freud, as is unsurprising, the specific exigencies that conjure curiosity in the child are related to knowledge about sexual reproduction. That said, it does not thereby necessarily follow, as Bowlby claims, that "Freudian curiosity is always, primarily, sexual curiosity."³⁷ For one thing, questions raised by the birth of the sibling strike at the heart of human existence in all its fullness; these are "metaphysical questions," as Juliet Mitchell's brilliant account of the "sibling-complex" has taught us.³⁸

As curious seekers of answers to crucial questions, Freudian children develop a capacity to be curious while working through powerful attachments, prompted by vital aggressions and vital loves. Their attention and interest are directed in a doubled mode: an absorbed engagement with new events combines with suspicious concern about what all this means. As curious thinkers, they are at once both precritical *and* critical. Later clinicians and theorists will develop diverse understandings of the ways that curiosity becomes crucial not only to intellectual development (the sublimation of desires to make sense of the world in the pursuit of knowledge in artistic and scholarly terms) but also to intrapsychic relations. To take one example: Edward R. Shapiro, building on the work of Melanie Klein, isolates a "striking lack" of curious attention as a problem for alienated families; in such cases, he observes, one finds, in place of interest in one another, a deadly certainty. Families whose members, "are often extraordinarily certain that they know, understand, and can speak for the experience of other family members without further discussion or question" often evince stunted capacities for feeling as well as thinking.³⁹ In Shapiro's view, curiosity involves precisely the ability to be interested in the other. This coordinates with aspects of Wilfred Bion's notion of "reverie," a state of attention "open to all aspects of the loved object,"

that sets the stage for projective identification as (this is Bion) “an early form of what later grounds the capacity for thinking.”⁴⁰

From its earliest days, curiosity concerned this very dilemma: an attentive openness that needs to be subjected to “the capacity for thinking,” that is, to critical evaluation. For all its differences from medieval accounts of cognition, then, the psychoanalytic view of curiosity offers a similarly doubled account: curiosity involves the oscillation of open absorption with “puzzling out,” openness with critical distance. This enlarged understanding of curiosity might be useful, particularly as it pertains to reading strategies overall: what does it mean to be interested in the full range of experiences rendered via the texts we read? Shapiro’s articulation of the “extraordinary certainty” in incurious families resonates with the inert, predictable ways by which criticism can sometimes proceed. Whether in “symptomatic” or “surface” readings, the problem inheres in a brand of epistemological certainty about the best or most correct kinds of attention. How might we instead, in curious analytical fashion, be open to all aspects of a specific text, work of art, or cultural history, or to our varied responses to them? This involves analytical consideration of astonishment and resistance; absorption and impatience; the wonder-tales worthy of disenchanted critique alongside the feeling states that draw us to them. Taken together, this brand of curious attention would then be aimed at facilitating an enlarged capacity for understanding—professional or lay—renewing our facility for knowing, for reading, for loving, for puzzling out, for critiquing, for caring.

V. Conclusion: The Uses of Boredom

While cognitive studies offers insights on the complexities of attention and the problem of focus as well as distraction, cognitive models of curiosity have not made this leap. They tend, instead, to emphasize primarily the affective pleasures that curiosity entails, even as they re-describe well-known features of curiosity’s problems in new guises: the question of polymorphous distraction now regularly falls into one model (“the optimal arousal model”) of curious attention, and Aristotle’s natural desire to know things is now termed the “curiosity-drive theory,” a term that borrows from Freud’s language of drives even as it downplays questions of exigency usefully mobilized by psychoanalytic thinking.⁴¹

We might instead stay with the persistent questions about the ambivalence prompted by situations of exigency (as discussed by Freud) or, if put another way, by the ambivalence of attention that Bernard of Clairvaux articulated. The both/and question of curious cognition

urges an account attentive to the usefulness of boredom, to the productive rhythms of interest and disinterest, and to the ways that persistent refocusing or bored mind-wandering constitute a structural feature of curiosity and creativity both.

It might be time, that is, to get curious about what it means for a method to have “run out of steam,” and what it means for a discipline to debate its methods in such terms. Sustained focus even in the face of frustration and boredom remains as powerfully difficult as it is crucial to all intellectual work. We might reconsider the doubleness of attention and boredom as one more strange convergence about curiosity in a range of times and places: curiosity is not in this context the opposite of being boring or being bored. It is, instead, a kind of attention that needs to cope with moments of boredom, that thinks through the problem of what it means when and how something seems boring, a process that requires attending to Thales’s stars as well as to his feet: hitting the attentive sweet spot by moving in and through what Bernard of Clairvaux saw as an attentive range from restlessness to deadening tedium.

Attention to this kind of doubleness affirms a point that John Guilory has recently identified as residing at the heart of the literary arts: the work in teaching the arts of reading.⁴² We might, at this juncture, also recall that boredom, in Freud’s work and in psychoanalytic theory more generally, emerges at crucial moments, often as a sign of dissatisfaction or dismay, sometimes as a signal that something is being avoided or repressed.⁴³ As this suggests, and as the editors of the 2021 volume of essays *On Boredom: Essays in Art and Writing* demonstrate, boredom has never really been satisfyingly understood in simple opposition to curious engagement.⁴⁴ They ask “whether there is a creative or critical potential to boredom,” which, as Walter Benjamin once pointed out, proves “necessary to the creative work of making meaning, spun by the listener out of the multiple interpretations of a storyteller’s tale.”⁴⁵ I have endeavored to suggest here that we might reconsider boredom as a feature of critical and creative curiosity, and as a function of the extended ways we pay attention—sustaining absorption with lassitude, and working through our duller moments as part of the process by which fresh insights emerge.

To return once more and finally to Best and Marcus’s opening salvo in the “method wars,” and to the exigencies of our own critical scene, we might ask ourselves as well as our students what was being avoided in a “boredom” with critique. What fresh insights might emerge via unhappy readers “bored” by symptomatic readings? Or surface ones? Being curious about what our boredom means, no matter where that impatience emerges, turns our attention to the threats to things schol-

ars and students care about, increasingly perceived on all sides: from the elimination of faculty lines in the humanities to the difficulties of original doctoral research, to the singular quantitative assessment of research productivity, to the authoritarianism that increasingly takes aim at academic freedom. The method debates do, indeed, emerge (this is one of Guillory's insights) as a result of institutional exigencies persisting over time. Yet that is not the only story here. Recalling that boredom remains embedded in a long history of thinking about curiosity alludes to the urgency of our boredom as a curious practice, productive and promising all on its own.

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NOTES

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1 John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2022). Key responses include Stefan Collini, "Exaggerated Ambitions," *London Review of Books* 44, no. 23 (December 1, 2022), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n23/stefan-collini/exaggerated-ambitions>; Merve Emre, "Has Academia Ruined Literary Criticism?," *The New Yorker* 98, no. 46 (January 16, 2023), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/23/has-academia-ruined-literary-criticism-professing-criticism-john-guillory>; and Nicholas Dames, "A Profession! What Has Become of Literary Studies?," *The Nation* 316, no. 5 (March 6/13, 2023): 40–44.

2 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48.

3 Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 232 (emphasis mine).

4 Rita Felski's elaboration of enchantment is notably developed in *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008). I'm indebted to her thinking throughout—my use of the term "postcritical" is inspired by her 2015 book, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015).

5 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no.1 (2009): 1–21. Hereafter cited as SR.

6 As, for instance, in David Kurnick, "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas," *ELH* 87, no. 2 (2020), 349–74 (hereafter cited as AFL); and in Wolfram Schmidgen, "Appreciation After Critique," *New Literary History* 54, no.2 (2023), 1085–1111.

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