ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

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THE BIG FLAWED HEART
POEMS AFTER MIDDLEMARCH

KRYS TAL LANGUELL

#97
INTRODUCTION

Summer is a time for reading long books, and in 2015 I pulled a dusty copy of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* off my shelf hoping to get lost. I’d had the book since I lived in Indiana, where I’d salvaged it from a friend’s donate pile. This was my first attempt at reading it.

While I read, I wrote a series of untitled, lineated poems lacking punctuation, each responding to a range of pages. In part, I wrote to retain hold of the plot, cataloging the contents of my mind at the end of a day or two, to look at how my brain was processing the information. Perhaps writing the poems was also a way to stay inside the book, to reduce the number of hours during which I had to live in reality. I was a bit discombobulated. The same summer was the end of my year in the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council workspace program, so I’d had to move my books and rugs and crafting supplies home where there wasn’t much space for them. I misplaced my vintage iron with a cloth-wrapped cord. How do you lose an iron?

By repackaging the plot of a classic long novel into anecdotal, contemporary language, I created a reading journal that reflects the state of active engagement in negotiation with a torrent. How does a mind store and then recall knowledge? Does it look very different for every person? What does it look like for me?

The poems’ commentary on the novel’s representation of provincialism as a lifestyle and obstacle is consistent with my other work, which documents exploitative labor models and toxic family structures. I read (someplace in the morass of the internet) someone (probably more
than one someone) calling New York City, and its poetry community in particular, provincial, and this was of special intrigue to me while I lived there. Because it doesn’t just mean an enclave cut off from richer culture or taller buildings: rather, provincialism is also represented by the mindset that states, “I have everything I need right here, why would I ever leave?” It’s a lack of curiosity, and that’s puzzling and fascinating.

Eliot’s novel does not need my poetic CliffsNotes revision. The point isn’t to fix anything about the book, nor to make it more accessible to a particular audience, but rather to document the mechanics of the act of reading, a bit like Lisa Robertson’s work in Nilling. I would hope only that readers will appreciate how the quotidian concerns and basic mistakes of these characters resonate with our own concerns and mistakes since, as far as I can see, we haven’t yet solved the questions of money and love and how much is too much to ask of each other.
the study of a character
where individual ethic surfaces
it’s the unaccustomed depth
where fervor is lived
it’s solitude in imagination
planning the perfect crime but
never intending to actually do it
the unclarity of lacking a boss to please
with any gesture of pure work
be love in every word
the mantra extracted from careful observation
constant non-performance
did Aristotle say something
about trying repeatedly even overcompensating
for known inadequacies
or was that a less ancient
the idea relies on binaries of good & evil
anyway
does the slippage fall back down into hate then
if ideas are basic seesaw simple machine combo
a wedge and a lever
a tool
say yes to requests
for favors or borrowing
share with anybody
without judgment
unless
as is sometimes the case
the truth tells itself and is not pretty
going about a quickly invented errand to improve his chances
a man may make an error in judgment with no friend witnessing against hasty horse trading
you know men will trade horses as long as there are horses still around trotting or cantering having speculative value the imagination left to itself is drunk on perfume is in gridlock traffic so owing an apology is a special pain what crow what defeat is this a bulky pack no end to unpleasant surprise must reorient the rogue mind off thinking its own important thoughts all full with rectitude wonderland of obstacles what C. S. Lewis had to say about salt

is someone else falling short of being love manifest motto not mantra channeling energy to a person in need of invisible support against an obstacle it is vague and it will continue on the same path of not your business as long as your mind is closed to magic if you want to be a witch you must relent abandon the reflex that first sight tells you anything true at all
the glances at rival brocade
belie the seriousness of bringing
a matter to one’s attention
which unchecked may further
limit one’s future happiness
to an individual with a single purpose
what else can come to mind
her own flirtation bloats
and what explodes or what relents
in response to her waggle of fingertips
true the setting is provincial but
the families don’t feel small to
themselves or their bank president
impulse toward gain
softening of ideology
a few teardrops fall and it’s decided
wake up on time and practice a hobby
a drama of manners where no one
is rude quite apart from differing opinion
factions exist but tempers are mild
men’s health however enters unclarity
he must not be made anxious in the
slightest a task put to a girl to enforce
who has weighty anxieties already that
must now become secret and how will
keeping secrets suit her
charge of protection
to keep watch of a strange stuffy man
she’ll keep the task

how if you told an alien
we put it on everything
they’d be repulsed
at our lack of sense
and the men’s sensitivities will all outgrow
a certain couch in a certain room
with dust motes in what light gets in
full of unread books she’ll curse the full
contents of the house before long
to an eye dead to collars and ornament
a heart wanting a worthy of depth
give the mourners ham and veal
while the master lies in his bedrest
men seated in the kitchen with their
googly eyes on the girl keeping them
fed on master’s pantry
waiting for the fatal blow
blood entitles the guests to dine on
whatever stores the property contains
and the young layabout also ill and
the aged scholar husband also ill
gloom persists
he states he has made his will
and swipes with his gold-handled
cane at the intruders
has a man a right to swing at his blood
undocumented how he acquired property
yet depth of detail on ethic of girl
preparing death feasts for cousins et cetera
asks the wrong mother for advice
nature of provinciality
word is deed and only so few chances
the doctor considered kind of a laborer
not as desirable as the big landowners for
marriage material
provincial overlaps much with superrich
in cities just fewer books and worse cut
of trousers or jib
about the engagement
the father says the doctor is
a poor man
the doctor buys a dinner service
it’s quite expensive
but he thinks since you only buy it
once & does not consult his
dear in this domestic task
so eager to rush the wedding to
get through it men keep imagining
that marriage will calm her
& then they can get back to work
science or philosophy research with
the benefit of the limit to womanly
education just enough to keep busy
in the house ready with affection &
music at any moment in short trained
for servitude without selfhood as if
this matched the girl each engaged himself
to but maybe they think opinions solely
come for wedding party details and a bit
the honeymoon itinerary what’s the big
deal he thinks a bunch of nonsense yet
the order of things is resultant and its
inverse you see completely reliant on
family mores of an ethic the boy’s gone
quite pale as he’d made plans to do nothing
the timeline is set by tradition and rut
comes from wear which is confirmation
that one who wishes to alter the course finds
himself alone in the tall grass of a moment
the scholar determines who is welcome visitor to his landholdings and table
lets his mood flip in the face of non-ideal news imagines himself a kind of king
on what grounds must he be obeyed is it the purity of his blood aristocratic destiny
doesn’t want a cousin so far below him it offends him deeply to what end must
a record of his injured feelings be kept he is rich it’s confirmed and all his tenants
live in safe comfortable cottages with no squalor whatsoever sometimes the thought
of women married to rich old men is enough to cry about a perfect squalor of inner life
what depth is possible when all is either whisper or palliative nursing so the job is to wait for
his death which is a mean small hope pray you don’t die in childbirth before you can enjoy
what he’s left you unless he too is a secretive petty old crank who wishes to see you faint
at his coffin when you learn you’ll be going to stay with uncle somebody he gets the last laugh
that’s how this has always worked

the time for her ideas was on the matter of wallpaper and linens
she asks permission to speak is often told that’s the last of it to build safe cottages or advise
on what’s fair and righteous better suits her but now the man’s health is brought in for a reason to value
his thoughts as superior spare him the stress of disagreement the type that won’t notice her loss of vim appreciate the silence
accompanying her while she is serious no music or ornament as with most women she wants to read and be of use to the world what opportunities
does he imagine he affords her how long must she be grateful for her boring honeymoon spent touring art and architecture site and another
how fortunate that she be young and formidable unsilly yet before long he’ll wish he had a stupid bride or none at all instead of this unusual figure
gritting her teeth minding her inner life
it shifted into a different house
and then a new set of concerns
it was just yesterday
the husband asked the doctor
what was really wrong with him
the husband is very distrustful
suspects his wife of wrong motives
the journalist nephew of designs
on the wife seems to be cooking up
some adjustments to his will
as predicted in these pages
few characters in the plot in pursuit
of doing good for humankind
not so much aware that such a
phenomenon exists just a self and
a few acquaintances a few officials
that lucky dad who has been at work
for causes and not pay wants to help
the layabout rich boy but really should
keep his attention on his own several
children he is the big
heart in town who gives it all away mister
set a little imaginary income aside
nonetheless

good news inspires the big flawed heart
to make plans for sharing income prior
to official agreement contract
if terms shift out of speculation into say
an unpaid internship wife unit
will bop his nose certainly while
daughter who was called an old brick
by a child would be redissapointed too
trust of a good letter come by post
what of the other seven letters for father
that day a noon meeting proposed
did he remember to send his reply or
was the idea misfiled into a drafts folder
in new workplaces too we make mistakes
wonder what will these people think
it's nervous to see others flinging trust
around as if it were infinite and ready
what if we only have a little what if we
go hungry for it later and wish differently
on the topic of medical advice
blistering is a common treatment
when physicking falls short
the pills a fertile mother takes to
get through a busy month of baking
the brown rather than pink recipe
has worked for years a tumor they
might want cut but first it’s manners
among doctors offense his patient
cured better by a younger man better
because the servant was no longer sick
and with no cutting into her others
from the brink of death some say
unnaturally no autopsy practice in
place the young doctor thinks aloud
of graverobbing historical figures
to his wife’s disgust who says no
misery please for us make discoveries
without upsetting people they have
a little consumer debt having rushed
the wedding the banker built the new
hospital though a low profession
other bodies’ fluids and temperaments
says wife she is opposed to muck & bile
a second time a young woman refuses
to obey a man and he’s dead by morning
"by" in this case stretches to include the
period of hours prior to his expiration
slumped over a picnic table in his cape
frantic work and the next chapter
skips ahead weeks a woman in grief
what does she do how is it different than
sitting in her room with a few books
and a window would be hard to notice
his absence no one passing her a note
about what room to eat her dinner in
next marker will be the day to open
his desk someone interprets the will at
her its codicil appended to exert control
from the grave who’ll never receive a
portion of the wealth the only person
she had spoken up for to split the land
romance came about during illness in the mayor’s house anyone left unsupervised might fall in love the unmarried meet each other then forget their oaths to self one bride had a boy baby the doctor’s wife miscarried horseback riding knocked her fetus loose still he could not be angry with her now she has sneaked that they might not sell the house to her ex-suitor and she not admitting simply her humiliation instead she meddles in business unlike her unlike a lady to begin a foray into meeting agents provincial how she writes to relatives thinks only of the men’s opinion of her appearance not considering the ladies might not want her around much plaits a nuisance vanity can be called another name depends on the context surface or aesthetics labor is another the mayor’s pretty daughter thinks men will invite her to live on family land she wishes they would move to London after she said she wished she’d died with the baby mister doctor went to the gambling house to see a man about some business and began betting at cards and winning for a time but embarrassing himself when spendthrift brother-in-law arrived himself a bit in shame a man of pleasures and called him away to another meeting he could compose himself shake off the spell brother gets a warm advice but doctor is alone in his affairs might be that bank president will ask him to do away with the alcoholic troublemaker now holed up on his property there would be some money in that for him while banker yet worries himself ill considers moving his wife to the next town over to hide wealth got from others’ losses making loans and pawning for the desperate predatory indeed he absorbed the widow’s holdings on her death even as he knew her daughter was living he sensing the end would do well to indulge a loan to the poor doctor seeing how stress of protecting his wealth is killing him is it habit that prevents his generosity he says his wife’s family has borrowed large sums of his it is their extravagant educations that accustom them to a life failing to also acquire skills or business to afford their tastes are quite outside their budget yet they cast about for reasons would the boy have earned like they hoped in the clergy as he would find need of for his own family
not much going right anymore
villain dispatched victim fancies
himself passive though he’s arranged
the man’s expiration aggressively
while no one of consequence looked
on the respite brief since rascal’d
already told the secret all over as he
was a drunk and one cannot trust
a drunk to silence gave the opium and
the brandy and covered it up opposing
medical views provide alibi one man
knew and it was known but did he plan
to kill him his land agent as well novels
make plain evil once indulged doesn’t
relent in its appeal consequences expose
the wrongdoing only inasmuch as it
cannot go on replicating itself without
incurring severe punishment or why
check power banker is elderly popular
opinion was against him anyway but
now it’s turned out of hand his heart
cannot cycle his breath in regular puffs
collapse at town meeting melodrama
but at seventy perhaps the man just dies

no one else died and the kids got
married like they wanted to after
finally admitting they felt love in
each other’s company all only once
she set aside her misery having slept
on the floor in her gown sobbing
returned to her rival to still set right
the matter of debts and rumors which
seemed to her total injustice she spoke
for the doctor volunteered to intercede
in repair to his reputation as an honest
man and true even her solutions work
every time they benefit others such was
her religion in practical terms despite
her perception that her own lover held
this wife’s hands to his mouth and pulled
away in shame when she entered letter in
her hand to explain how she’d fix some
element of their ruin dropped the letter on
the desk and walked out to sob at home
all her interest faded away and yet plot had
her return to finish her favor and unfold
of consequences led to epilogue marriage
she did give up all the land to be with him
the formerly idle painter the spurned heir
KRYSSTAL LANGUELL lives in Chicago. She is the author of two books, *Call the Catastrophists* and *Gray Market*, and five chapbooks, including a collection of interviews, *Archive Theft* (Essay Press, 2015). A NYSCA/NYFA 2017 Artist Fellowship Finalist in Poetry, she previously completed a Lower Manhattan Cultural Council workspace residency in 2014-15 and a Poetry Project Emerge-Surface-Be fellowship in 2013-14. Since 2010, she has helped coordinate the activities of Belladonna* Collaborative while publishing the feminist poetry journal *Bone Bouquet*. She was an adjunct in New York City for seven years.
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