



## BOOK REVIEW

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To cite this article: Danuta Fjellestad (2015) BOOK REVIEW, Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, 7:1, 28586, DOI: [10.3402/jac.v7.28586](https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v7.28586)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v7.28586>



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Published online: 12 Jun 2015.



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Richard Begam and James Soderholm. *Platonic occasions: dialogues on literature, art and culture* (Verlag: Stockholm University Press, 2015). Stockholm English Studies 1. ISBN-10: 9176350002, ISBN-13: 978-9176350003. Paperback, \$12.62; 206 pages.

Despite numerous (and well-justified) anxieties, concerns, and resistance, Open Access publishing seems to be an inevitable future for the humanities. But while quite a few Open Access journals have established themselves as respectable scholarly venues, for monographs this alternative mode of publishing has hardly been available, despite the fact that the monograph continues to be the main currency in almost all humanities subjects. The glacial speed with which publishing monographs moves toward Open Access has multiple reasons, as Martin Paul Eve insightfully shows in his *Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies and the Future* (published by Cambridge Books Online in 2014). Eve's book is essential reading for anyone, not least because it clarifies the very concept of Open Access and its Gold, Green, and Hybrid varieties. Of the few publishing venues for those who want to see their monographs made available digitally at no financial cost beyond those intrinsic to using the Internet, the not-for-profit Open Humanities Press can boast both a very rigorous peer review process and an impressive editorial board. The book under review here has been published by a newcomer on the Open Access scene, Stockholm University Press. More specifically, it is the first volume in the Stockholm English Studies series.

*Platonic Occasions: Dialogues on Literature, Art and Culture* by Richard Begam and James Soderholm consists of ten conversations between the two scholars; the exchanges are organized in three parts bearing the titles "Art and Aesthetics," "Evil, Death, Love, Politics," and "Philosophical

Digressions." The scope of subjects that Begam and Soderholm talk about is enormous: the legacy of the Enlightenment, the workings of memory and forgetting, mimesis, the dire state of the arts in the United States, the role of religion in contemporary America, the role of literature, the function of criticism—the list could go on and on. And then there are philosophers in great numbers, with Descartes, Heidegger, Kant, Nietzsche, and Plato looming large, and Beckett, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth seconding them as writers. Begam and Soderholm move in this rich landscape of canonical figures with great ease and sometimes even grace; they seem to be equally versed in—although much less fond of—popular culture.

The erudition of the authors notwithstanding, I find the volume unsettlingly uneven and even baffling. At times *Platonic Occasions* offers astute insights: Begam's reading of Giuseppe Croff's 1860 sculpture *Veiled Nun* or his succinct explanation of what is wrong with Achebe's interpretation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are captivating. Many times the authors' juxtapositions of "high" and "low" cultural phenomena are striking and thought-provoking: what is the difference between Odysseus's scar and the facial scar of Tina Fey? What do Brecht and Toto, the dog in *The Wizard of Oz*, have in common? Often, their jaunty opinions are memorable: Tracey Emin has the sensibility "not of an artist but of a stock clerk" (*Platonic occasions* 12); Emma Darwin, the author of *The Mathematics of Love*, we are told, "has a prose style about as attractive as a Galapagos turtle" (*Platonic occasions* 98). In the long run, however, the associative, anecdotal, and gossipy mode of writing becomes irritating and tiresome; rich in detail, full of bits and pieces of thought, and crowded by numerous witticisms, the volume is but a bewildering collection of opinions rather than arguments.

So the reader whose curiosity, like mine, may be piqued by the figure of “dialogue” in the volume’s title is likely to be woefully disappointed. Once quite popular, the genre of dialogue has been largely absent from the literary scene. In the introduction to *Platonic Occasions* Begam and Soderholm explicitly state their intention to renew and reinvent the dialogue as a literary and philosophical exploration. The blurb on the back cover promotes the book as offering “a new form of dialogic knowledge based on the friction and frisson of two minds contending, inventing and improvising.” The volume does offer a spectacle of two minds in action, but little of this action produces dialogic knowledge. Whatever knowledge is produced is fogged by unilluminating banalities (“In our contemporary, ‘down-load’ culture, there is no such thing as origin or originality or copy: it’s simulacra all the way down”; “Death is not absurd. Old age is”; “Men often chase younger women because they fear death”) or irrelevant confessions (who cares that one of them has been depressed since the age of ten or that he stood up a woman because he did not like the way she wrote).

This brings me to the question I kept asking myself as I was reading the book: for whom was *Platonic Occasions* written? What is its intended audience? The publishing venue would indicate that the addressee is a literary scholar, but if so, the glossary of foreign language word and phrases indicates that this scholar is intellectually inferior to the authors, that he or she is lacking in knowledge of even such basic terms as *agapē*, *eros*, *polis*, *tabular rasa*, *ekphrasis*, or *epistēmē*. So perhaps the volume envisages students as its readers? But if so, isn’t it likely that students would need a gloss on Johnny Appleseed or Carolee Schneemann as much as on *cogito*? Like J. Alfred Prufrock’s mermaids, Begam and Soderholm appear to be singing each to each,

leaving the reader out. Perhaps what has driven Begam and Soderholm to publish their exchanges is the same desire they ascribe to artists: like them, they too have been “beguiled by the idea of immortalizing themselves by writing” (87).

Of course Begam and Soderholm are in good company: narcissistic vanity is widespread not only among Hollywood but also among academic celebrities, the navel-gazing fashion having now extended even to wannabe starlets. Some may find this irritating, others endearing. I am less concerned about the boastfulness and self-indulgence of *Platonic Occasions* as about its ranting about the state of research in the humanities: “scholarship is mostly dead,” we hear; “literary studies in the academy have become dysfunctional, and one of the principles reasons for the current mess is ideologically motivated reading.” With such friends of the humanities as Begam and Soderholm, who needs Thatcher-inspired enemies among politicians and bureaucrats?

This review is much more mean-spirited and petulant that I would have liked it to be. It is not that *Platonic Occasions* does not have its moments of intellectual insight or a good share of compelling remarks. But as a whole it lacks, I think, in relevance. The following comment by one of the authors can be read as sadly self-reflexive: “You and I aren’t changing the world. We’re entertaining ourselves and the (very) few students who are amused by our jokes.” One may only hope that *Platonic Dialogues* will find some readers who will find themselves amused.

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