

PATRICIA MCMANUS

## PARSING THE PERSONAL

### *On the Project of a Radical Aesthetic Education*

**T**HERE IS SOMETHING utopian about Joseph North's project to reopen a space within literary studies for criticism. His bold reconstruction, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017), launched a sustained polemic against what he saw as the reigning historicist-contextualist paradigm of the discipline—represented by Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Gayatri Spivak, Franco Moretti—in which the assumed goal of literary study was cultural and social analysis. Against this, North called for a renewed programme of left literary criticism that would also be a radical aesthetic education, one which aimed to cultivate modes of sensibility and subjectivity that could contribute directly to the struggle for a better society. He presented this as a radicalized version of I. A. Richards's critical programme from the interwar period, defined by the 'strength and directness of its connection to the world outside the academy'. He hoped to detect at least intimations of this new paradigm in the work of Isobel Armstrong, Eve Sedgwick, D. A. Miller and Lauren Berlant.<sup>1</sup>

To seek to exchange a scholarship that merely interprets the world for a criticism that tries to change it is admirable, even exhilarating. In a field that is generally fractured and fractious, reading a contribution that is both pragmatic and radicalizing in its ambition is bracing. North is so precise and careful, so methodical a writer, that he does not register this excitement in his prose: that is for his readers to do. He does, however, note the project's reliance on hope. In his response in these pages to Francis Mulhern's friendly but quizzical review, North reflects on the formidable obstacles in the way of any institutional realization of his project, readily conceding that there is 'more hope than calculation'

in his prospectus—that it relies on an ‘optimism of the will’. That it is not enough, he knows, but that it is necessary is not in doubt. Lola Seaton, too, in her contribution to the NLR discussion, salvages from Mark Fisher’s coruscating critiques of contemporary culture not only the gleam of a hope that things could be better, but the determination to make them so.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I explore some of the obstacles to North’s project in the same spirit of hope; one that recognizes—in frustration and some perturbation—that carrying on as we are is not enough. This is not because the humanities are in crisis so much as because the conditions in which they are being pursued is intolerable, for staff but also for students. The fallout from Covid in the university sector has only thrown this into starker relief. If North’s project is to win a hearing, the state of higher education as a space of employment and learning has to be reckoned with. The conditions of cultural production—indeed, the collapse of the concept of culture, under the sheer weight of material—is a seismic difference between our era and that of I. A. Richards, the founding figure of North’s history whose inaugural practice of criticism within the academy he urges us to re-imagine. On the other hand, in terms of the relation of literary criticism and study to the reading public, Richards’s era can perhaps be conceived as the beginning of ours, the early moment of the volatilization of the ‘general reader’ and of attempts to secure certain types of literature as precious in and of themselves.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows I suggest that such a programme urgently requires mid-range concepts, to intermediate between the personal and the social or historical, the text, the reader and the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*, Cambridge MA 2017, pp. 7–9, 5, 156–80.

<sup>2</sup> See, in order of publication, Francis Mulhern, ‘Critical Revolutions’, NLR 110, March–April 2018; Joseph North, ‘Two Paragraphs in Raymond Williams: A Reply to Francis Mulhern’, NLR 116/117, Mar–June 2019, p. 186; Lola Seaton, ‘The Ends of Criticism’, NLR 119, Sept–Oct 2019, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> It might be more accurate to say it was part of the end of the beginning, as Richards’s work, along with others—Q. D. Leavis’s *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Ezra Pound’s *How to Read* (1929) and *ABC of Reading* (1934), F. R. Leavis’s *How to Teach Reading* (1932) and the essays in Virginia Woolf’s *The Common Reader* (1925)—not only registered the decomposition of the classic model of the reading public but also attempted to find ways to shore up a new public for literature.

First, however, I want to suggest that the aesthetic turn in literary studies has already happened—that North is pushing at an open door. The turn has taken several forms, but where these are not openly nostalgic or idealizing, they converge in a focus on the reader. This often means a focus on the reader's personal sensibility, or on the reader as personal sensibility, and on valorising that attention as somehow more democratic, or more honest; a recognition of phenomenological priority which is at the same time a shrugging-off of what are seen to be the pretences and proxies of history, theory or critique. This centring of the personal, and of personal aesthetic evaluation, is becoming more and more pervasive across the field of literary studies. Whether this work is critical, let alone radical in North's world-changing sense, is more complicated. I will explore examples of it below, aiming to tease out of some of its motives and consequences in order to get a clearer sense of their implications for a project like North's, before going on to discuss some of the material preconditions for that project's realization.

### *The populist urge*

In a 2012 essay, Rachel Sagner Buruma and Laura Heffernan evoked a spectre haunting Literary Studies:

In the new millennium, a new figure beckons to the literary critic: the figure of the common reader. We see her out of the corner of our collective eye outside the classroom window or walking away from the back of the lecture hall; glimpsed in the public library stacks, but never in 'the archive', she leaves her traces in blog comments and Amazon reviews. Her authority derives from her lack of credentials; neither scholar nor critic, student nor expert, she is defined largely by her undisciplined and undisciplined reading practices.<sup>4</sup>

Buruma and Heffernan situate the emergence of the 'common reader' in the context of the sociological moment that preceded it, in which critical and interpretive practices in Literary Studies departments were read as struggles for prestige or bids to accrue more cultural capital, *à la* Bourdieu (the seminal work was indeed John Guillory's *Cultural*

---

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Sagner Buruma and Laura Heffernan, 'The Common Reader and the Archival Classroom: Disciplinary History for the Twenty-First Century', *New Literary History*, vol. 43, no. 1, Winter 2012, p. 113.

*Capital*, 1993). Once this cynical view of literary scholarship had been internalized, they suggest, the allure of the common reader became clear: innocent of cultural-capital accumulation practices, she is in touch with the wider popular culture, with her own feelings, values and interests. Rather than probing a literary work for its interestingly symptomatic flaws, she seeks to ‘confer plenitude upon it’, in the manner of Sedgwick’s ‘reparative’ reading practice: to find in the work therapeutic resources for an inchoate self.<sup>5</sup> Scanning half a dozen discussions of the common reader by leading literary scholars, *circa* 2008, Buurma and Heffernan find that she is treated not as a member of a social demographic but as ‘a mascot, muse or model’ who licenses the scholars to read as she does—‘referentially, nonsuspiciously, with affect, and only until we become distracted or bored.’ For Nicholas Dames, her reading is tied to the rhythms of the body; for Rita Felski, she values enchantment, shock and recognition.<sup>6</sup>

For Buurma and Heffernan, the need for this figure of a common reader tells us more about the existential crisis of literary studies than about how reading happens. This abstractly ‘ordinary’ and potently personal reader serves to set up strawman oppositions—counterposing, for example, the sceptical, dispassionate critic to the believing, empathetic reader—that ‘beg to be dismissed’. In their own work, they turn instead to an archival study of the classroom—the mimeographed handouts and of Cleanth Brooks’s austere close-reading courses at Yale, contrasted to the joyously open-ended sessions that Edmund Wilson ran at Chicago and Harvard, treating cross-disciplinary students to eclectically historicizing classes on Joyce, Dickens or the literature of the American Civil War—a little like North’s idea.

Yet the appeal of the common reader—if not under that history-haunted name—has only grown stronger since Buurma and Heffernan’s intervention. She remains too great a lure to be refused. In their recent polemic, *Character*, Felski, Amanda Anderson and Toril Moi insist that critics are common readers, too—or at least, they have family members that are. The trio argue that Buurma and Heffernan’s suggestion that, as they summarize, ‘critics are now cathecting onto a nostalgic idea of

---

<sup>5</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’, in Sedgwick, ed., *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Durham NC 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Buurma and Heffernan, ‘The Common Reader and the Archival Classroom’, pp. 113–5.

the common reader—as symbolizing a more authentic relationship to literature—in hope of escaping their own status as professionals’, gets things backwards:

The figure of the ordinary or nonacademic reader (‘common reader’ is a phrase now rarely used) is not just a trope invented by critics to convey their own sense of professional anomie . . . Many of us have friends or family members who participate in book clubs or line up for hours to get an autograph from Stephen King. The interest in ordinary readers is not a puzzling new fashion that requires decryption—such readers are a backdrop to the lives of many, perhaps most, literary critics.<sup>7</sup>

Felski, Moi and Anderson then go on to suggest a hermeneutics of fictional character that sets the privatized ordinary reader at its core. They are interested in ‘how fiction connects to ordinary life’, the responses of lay as well as academic audiences. They are inclined to treat literary works as sources of insight, rather than examples of unknowingness or complicity, and therefore welcome philosophical treatments of literature as a form of moral education—whether in affective knowledge (Martha Nussbaum), sensitivity to cruelty (Richard Rorty) or scepticism and acknowledgement (Stanley Cavell)—even if these are weak on formal-fictional analysis. They are committed to building on ‘the variety and complexity of ordinary responses to fictional characters’, and don’t want to draw strict boundaries between ‘real-world’ and ‘story-world’ knowledge and rules. They question the professional ‘taboo’ against ‘naively’ treating fictional characters as real people (a practice skewered by L. C. Knights’s ‘How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?’ back in the 1930s). While they recognize that academic criticism and everyday reading serve different functions and purposes, they welcome the discipline’s wider turn towards ‘taking “ordinary readers” seriously’, following the lead set by Cultural Studies—even if, as they ruefully note, it is driven in part by institutional problems, such as falling enrolment in Literature departments, which ‘inspire a new concern with building bridges to wider publics.’<sup>8</sup>

### *Selection*

In some respects, Amy Hungerford’s *Making Literature Now* (2016) provides a weathervane to these changing trends. Its early chapters, focused

---

<sup>7</sup> Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, Toril Moi, *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, Chicago 2019, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Felski, Moi, *Character*, pp. 2–3, 5, 10–11.

on the publishing network around *McSweeney's* and Dave Eggers, are mainly ethnographic, taking leads from Bourdieu's literary sociology and from Cultural Studies, with a bow to Actor-Network Theory; Hungerford began her research in the basement archives of *McSweeney's*'s San Francisco office in 2010. *Making Literature Now's* central concern is with cultural markets: 'how literary quarterlies generate cultural and actual capital to distribute from celebrity to subsistence writers'; 'the requirements of market success in the trade category of literary fiction'; what 'a debut in *McSweeney's* is worth'. As Hungerford explains, she wanted to write 'about literary work in its multifarious forms':

And by work I don't only mean works—novels or stories—but also work in the ordinary sense: the daily labour of those who read, write, review, teach, make, distribute, design, and sell books and other forms of writing that become classed under that baggy term, literature. They do so, or try to do so, for a living.<sup>9</sup>

While most of *Making Literature Now* involves the world of small magazines and struggling writers, the last two chapters look at novelists who have made it big in the 'trade press': Jonathan Safran Foer—whose successful first novel Hungerford acutely diagnoses as combining two market prerequisites, 'innovation and familiarity', in the form of a meta-fictional-experimentalist third-generation Holocaust novel—and David Foster Wallace, whom Hungerford declines to read. The chapter in question, 'On Not Reading DFW', is most revealing for what it tells us about the tendency towards 'personalization' in literary studies. As she explains, the essay was originally commissioned by the *LA Review of Books*, which was interested in 'a put-down of Saint Dave', whom Hungerford sees as surrounded by a beatifying haze since his death in 2008: viewed by his fans—evidently the wrong sort of common reader—as a font of humane wisdom. The *LARB* editors, however, wanted her to back up her argument with a close reading of *Infinite Jest*—which Hungerford, who had not read the novel, refused to provide. After all, she remarks, she had tenure, so didn't 'need' to publish an *LARB* piece.<sup>10</sup>

The chapter instead sets out Hungerford's arguments for not reading Wallace. They provide, in condensed form, a sort of anti-paradigm paradigm for current trends of literary study as personalized aesthetic

---

<sup>9</sup> Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, Stanford 2016, pp. 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, pp. 146, 159–60.

evaluation, of unavoidable relevance to North's project. The supposedly scandalous decision not to read *Infinite Jest* drew some attention at the time—what will these feminists do next?—but Hungerford's methodological moves were part of a broader pattern. Though inspired by an admittedly 'prurient' detail related by Wallace's girlfriend, Hungerford's chapter aims to be about reading practice and literary culture. She identifies two new developments in the cultural conditions under which literature is made and studied.<sup>11</sup> The first of these is the familiar problem of quantity—what Hungerford calls 'the undeniable fact of literary overproduction'—which makes it hard to see, let alone make sense of, the sheer volume of texts published every year; a question which, as she notes, Franco Moretti has been addressing for decades.<sup>12</sup>

The second, more amorphous, claim draws on the figure of the ordinary reader. The worry is that literary study has become so specialized as to be irrelevant to all but the most rarefied of publics. Readers inside and outside the academy, Hungerford claims, are calling for scholars to speak in voices that non-specialists can understand; for literary studies 'to become more *human*'—less concerned with 'world history' or 'the planetary'. Here Hungerford channels Felski's caricatural attack on what she calls 'historicism', in the name of personal evaluation: for literary scholarship to focus on the relation of a work to the culture that produced it is to sidestep its present-day appeal—if not to use history as 'an alibi' for avoiding the personal.<sup>13</sup> For Felski, the route out of historicism leads to a 'non-optional' embrace of privatized evaluation: 'We are condemned to choose, required to rank, endlessly engaged in practices of selecting, sorting, distinguishing, privileging'—'the critique of value merely underscores the persistence of evaluation in the very act of assigning a negative judgement.'<sup>14</sup> That the classic meaning of critique has less to do with judgement than with explanation—a form of understanding geared towards persuasion or argument—slows neither Felski nor Hungerford. Scholars need to foreground their personal preferences—especially so, in today's oversaturated cultural world—rather than

---

<sup>11</sup> Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, pp. 141–2.

<sup>12</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, London and New York 2005. Between 1940 and 1999, new fiction titles in the US ranged from 5,000 to 10,000; in 2010, it was 55,000.

<sup>13</sup> Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, pp. 141–4, citing Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Hoboken 2009, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 20.

conceal them behind supposedly objective considerations of a work's position in history.

*What's he worth?*

The consequences of all this are at play in 'On Not Reading DFW'. Personalization—less a matter of positioning than of style—provides Hungerford with a solution to the problems of selection, voice and aesthetic value. Overproduction doesn't prevent selective close reading: the problem of scale instead becomes a problem of choice, the question not how to read, but what to read—Hungerford peeling bare her decision on *Infinite Jest*. Heeding the call for non-specialized, 'more human' voices, she moves to forge one such voice—her own. 'On Not Reading' is written in the fluent, educated yet light-touch style one would expect of a *LARB* essay, albeit falling short of *LARB* intellectual standards. But what of aesthetic evaluation, when the author's major work has not been read? Hungerford does not duck the question. In preparation for her put-down, she had read D. T. Max's life of the novelist, in which Wallace's girlfriend lightly notes that on his reading tours, he liked what she termed 'audience pussy'. Scouring the biography, Hungerford finds a pattern of misogyny in Wallace's relations with women. Nevertheless, it would be 'churlish and arbitrary' to question the value of literary output on the basis of an author's private and mostly consensual behaviour with women. 'After all, our favourite book lists are bound to include the works of rogues, misogynists and manipulators of all genders.' Wallace's 'formidable struggle' with depression, addiction and alcoholism should also be acknowledged.<sup>15</sup>

'What is at stake in the relationship between writing and misogyny', Hungerford affirms, 'is not sexual morality—about which we might all differ—but the quality of the art Wallace produced.'<sup>16</sup> How should this quality be judged? Here the category of the personal comes to her aid, conjoined to the Bourdieu-inspired market values that animate the earlier chapters of *Making Literature Now*, to produce the notion of 'worth'. Helpfully for Hungerford, the referents of 'worth' may as easily be moral as monetary or aesthetic. Does Wallace have anything to say that is 'worth attending to?', she asks. Does he say 'anything worth saying'

<sup>15</sup> Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, pp. 141, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, p. 147.



on topics of interest to her? How does one decide, 'to invest the time to study his work?' If time with a novel is time invested, 'worth' is the anticipated return. Later Hungerford elaborates that the specific form aesthetic worth takes—the currency in which invested time's dividends are paid—is 'insight', or 'genuine insight', or simply having 'something smart to say'.<sup>17</sup>

The inadequacy of a literary-aesthetic criterion that strips the work of its novel-ness, its fictionality, doesn't need underlining. Striking, too, is Hungerford's apparent refusal to read *Infinite Jest* in order to discuss a graduate student's dissertation on it. She illustrates her hard-boiled personalized procedure with the example of a couple of novels by Updike and Auster, which 'didn't teach me anything'. 'Did I read everything they wrote? No, like a good scientist, I decided it would be a poor use of resources (in this case, time) to extend an experiment that had already produced what I considered negative results.' The same arithmetic is applied to Wallace: 'From the evidence I have'—Max's biography, 'research my students have done', some critical essays, the few stories she had read—the critical self-consciousness for which among other things Wallace is praised cannot run very deep.' Hungerford has 'done her homework', she declares, and decided that reading more of Wallace's work 'just isn't worth it'.<sup>18</sup>

As she informs us—bringing the personal further into the frame—Hungerford, who teaches contemporary American literature at Columbia, was writing the *LARB* essay in 2013 while leading a summer course at a college in Vermont: a 'paradisial place', set among meadows and forests, where she had the time to go running every day and 'blow off steam' about her DFW piece with a fellow professor of literature; a 'matchless scene' for literary conversation, she explains. Her jogging mate kindly advises her to 'give up all the crapola' she is working on and read some Proust, James or *Middlemarch*, which her career had somehow not required. Determining to 'find the time' to download the audiobook, to surprise him, Hungerford discovers that her friend is right: 'the human wisdom and human mercy' of *Middlemarch* overshadow anything she has read for decades.<sup>19</sup> She duly cites it to graduating seniors and seems especially enamoured of Eliot's epitaph on Dorothea, 'faithfully living

---

<sup>17</sup> Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, pp. 149, 150.

<sup>18</sup> Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, pp. 150–2.

<sup>19</sup> Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, p. 166.

a hidden life', which she quotes admiringly in the closing pages of her DFW chapter:

Her finely touched spirit still had its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffuse, for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on . . . the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

In an essay on misogyny, it is chilling to see Hungerford concur so complacently with the narrator's silencing of the impassioned and intellectually restless Dorothea, metaphorically buried alive in the earth—or drowned in the streams—of Middle England. *Middlemarch* is best known for its powerful critiques of petty-bourgeois provincial conformity, but here Eliot—perhaps also burying her own radical-liberal and Young Hegelian youth—endorses the large-minded quietism propounded by those generally satisfied with the status quo. Is this where the personalized aesthetic turn in Literary Studies is doomed to lead us?

### *Personal and historical*

Not necessarily. The personal has an older and stubborn history within the work of literary criticism, which it would be useful to follow. For now, however, if we note the positioning of the personal as something 'hidden behind' history in recent models of reading, then we can perhaps glimpse a reconstitution of scholarship as something which can be—should be—deeply and openly personal. It is the 'scholarly reader'—not a personal reader—who steps out from 'behind history', but it is a reader who has absorbed the personal and transmuted it into choice and to evaluation. If we can keep the act of choice and its agent, the personal reader, in view, we may hope to open up a line of differentiation that could add content to the project for literary criticism broached by North.

Towards the end of his NLR reply, North moves to specify the sense of the aesthetic that Mulhern had suggested was left unsaid in *Literary Criticism*. In attempting to concretize his proposals, North registers the risks of any straightforward return to the category of the aesthetic—insisting that a properly materialist conception of it would be one that is 'quite thoroughly historical; quite thoroughly moral social and political'—as well as a critical practice oriented around the cultivation of

individual sensibility. He provides a close reading of two passages from Raymond Williams, urging us to recognize that they involve ‘aesthetics’ as well as ‘history and politics’, and offers a series of ‘heuristic maxims’ that might help to guide a renewed practice of aesthetic criticism:

The aesthetic response is the aggregate, or synthesis, of the subject’s whole array of incipient moral, social and political responses.

The aesthetic response is the means through which the subject accesses and develops practical, instrumental responses.

The aesthetic is the means through which experience strikes us as valuable or disvaluable.

The aesthetic is the realm of initial intuitions as to value.<sup>20</sup>

There is a noticeable absence here of ‘culture’, as a concept mediating between textual objects and the broader meanings of the social and political-economic order.<sup>21</sup> Arguably the ‘aesthetic’, released from its association with high art, may today allow for a more rigorous grasp of what is peculiar to cultural experiences, differentiating them from other modes of social being under late capitalism. But there is a need also to guard against the aesthetic’s tendency to veer towards the experiencing subject, to use the personal as a hermeneutic which absorbs what was once the preciousness, the potential for autonomy and depth, of the work of art itself. With these provisos in mind, we can say of North’s heuristic maxims that they are neatly rich provisional reformulations of what the ‘aesthetic’ might mean. They are however—separately and collectively—largely subject-facing, geared towards an education of the reader rather than an education in literature. They neglect the object, the work of art or other cultural form, which here risks becoming only the occasion for a response.

In their treatment of the aesthetic as indissolubly bound to the whole of experience, North’s maxims echo Richards’s own insistence on aesthetic values—contra aestheticism—as part of a greater whole, which he

---

<sup>20</sup> North, ‘Two Paragraphs’, p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> On the return of the aesthetic as also a shift away from culture in literary studies, see Claudia Breger, ‘The Return to Aesthetics in Literary Studies’, *German Studies Review*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2012; and Susan Hegeman, *The Cultural Return*, Los Angeles 2012.

termed the ‘moral’ or ‘ordinary values’ theory of art. Yet Richards’s critique of aestheticism relies not only on a democratized sense of value, but also on a subject who is not just a personal one:

Into an adequate reading of the greater kinds of poetry, everything not private and peculiar to the individual reader must come in. The reader must be required to wear no blinkers, to overlook nothing which is relevant, to shut off no part of himself from participation. If he attempts to assume the peculiar attitude of disregarding all but some hypothetically named aesthetic elements, he joins Henry James’s Osmond in his tower, he joins Blake’s Kings and Priests in their High Castles and Spires.<sup>22</sup>

In Lola Seaton’s contribution, ‘The Ends of Criticism’, the personal emerges as a thread, a necessary but mobile thread, in the experience of the critic of culture. The personal is not here at odds with history but is rather treated by Seaton as something that is both itself historical and simultaneously—sometimes hatefully, sometimes joyfully so—the medium through which living historical processes, including the things of culture, are encountered. In the important final section of her essay, which places Williams in dialogue with a critic of a later generation, Mark Fisher, the density of the personal’s imbrication with things that are not personal is brought to the surface and generates a methodological move:

In referring to his personal memories and impressions—his Suffolk—Fisher is not demanding that art simply mirror back what he knows, and dismissing it if it fails to . . . this is where William’s difficult concept of a ‘structure of feeling’ becomes useful because if one is to let oneself be guided by one’s personal experience in evaluating culture, and if one is to insist on the social relevance of such valuations, then one needs a way of conceptualising the ways in which experience can be shared.<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere, Seaton has written of Williams’s approach to lived experience as suggesting ‘a model for taking one’s experience seriously but not uncritically’:

It may also bequeath a confidence that what is personal need not be private but is often shared—that there is a common structure underlying individual feeling. Such self-distancing may help us scrutinize rather than reify our impressions, placing emotion beyond rational argument.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, pp. 64, 72.

<sup>23</sup> Seaton, ‘The Ends of Criticism’, p. 129.

<sup>24</sup> Lola Seaton, ‘How Raymond Williams Redefined Culture’, *New Statesman*, 25 August 2021.

The concept of a 'structure of feeling' is useful not only because it treats the personal as part of a collective—inevitably so—and illegible without that collectivity, but also because it is not something that needs to be directly experienced by the reader. It stretches beyond and before the text, or the cultural form under consideration, without simply being history or context. In aesthetic terms, structures of feeling are inevitably mediated through, articulated by, forms and genres. Williams addressed one aspect of this in the essay, 'The Writer: Commitment and Alignment':

When I hear people talk about literature, describing what so-and-so did with that form—how did he handle the short novel?—I often think we should reverse the question and ask, how did the short novel handle him. Because anyone who has observed his own practice of writing eventually finds that there is a point where, although he is holding the pen or tapping the typewriter, what is being written, while not separate from him, is not only him either, and of course this other force is literary form. Very few of us could write at all if certain forms were not available. And then we may be lucky, we may find forms which happen to correspond to our experience.<sup>25</sup>

Forms which correspond to our experience do not lie thick on the ground. But the historical ground of our contemporary experience, and of those who came before, is nevertheless littered with forms that enable writing. The alignments such forms allow are neither foisted upon their users, nor forged by them, but exist as the infrastructure of their communicability, of their being forms at all. Unlike the big country house that Williams evokes in *The Country and the City*, with its violent and proud absorption of the wealth, the land and the labour that surrounds it, the forms of writing do not nakedly call attention to what North terms their 'disparity', to the disparity of scale that Williams's paragraph asks us to see.<sup>26</sup>

What forms do, however, is move—mutate, morph, change over space and time—and one name for that movement is genre. This is a sense of genre that escapes the constraints imposed by treating it as a static classificatory system. As Mulhern puts it in *Figures of Catastrophe*, his exploration of the 'condition of culture' novel, a fundamental implication of the concept of genre is that it is not so much a classification as 'a formative power, a force of literary production'—or, as Williams put it, 'a way of seeing'. In his totalizing though tantalizingly brief discussion, Mulhern here notes that his conceptualization of genre works from the 'broad traditions of Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin', within which

---

<sup>25</sup> Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope*, London 1989, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> North, 'Two Paragraphs in Raymond Williams', p. 181.

genre can operate ‘at a relatively low level of historical generality’.<sup>27</sup> I would also claim for the concept the capacity to work at more abstract levels of historical generality.

In tracking the genre of utopia, for example, we can observe its mutations through the half-millennium of its existence, or examine the peculiarities of that existence in any one period or place—and our work will be most productive when we can interrelate both historical levels. Likewise with utopia’s belated sister-genre, dystopia. Though its existence is just over a century old, dystopia has shown all the ‘great and significant variation’ that, as Mulhern notes, is the mode of existence of any genre.<sup>28</sup> Across that century we can follow dystopia’s development from the localized, hyper-mobile political interventions of the 1870s, to the castigation of a whole ‘civilization’ of the mid-twentieth century, to the recent standardization of a ‘happy ending’ in examples from Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* (2008/2020) to Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* (2019), her sequel to *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985).

The value of genre for the literary historian—and hence for the literary critic—is the way it insists on being used to track back and forth across time and space. You cannot ‘close read’ a genre, but it is the silent bridge or mechanism that can move close reading up in scale, to grapple with a form’s endurance or withering, its mutations and their success or otherwise. It is one of those vital mid-level explanatory concepts, working at a scale capable of mediating between close and distant reading, between any one readership or reading public and the longer or older systematization of reading itself.<sup>29</sup> If genre were added to the cluster of terms which so far define the outlines of North’s radical-criticism project—experience, value, the ‘conscious eyes’ of careful reading—we would have an approach that does not dispense with history, but sees it working through the textual apparatus that calls forth, as Adorno put it in *Aesthetic Theory*, both evaluation and understanding as the basis for aesthetic response:

The diremption of understanding and value is a scientific institution: without values nothing is understood aesthetically and vice versa. In art, more

---

<sup>27</sup> Francis Mulhern, *Figures of Catastrophe: The Condition of Culture Novel*, London 2016, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Mulhern, *Figures of Catastrophe*, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Rachael Scarborough King stresses its potential to mediate between close and distant reading in ‘The Scale of Genre’, *New Literary History*, vol. 52, no. 2, Spring 2021.

than in any other sphere, it is right to speak of value. Like a mime, every work says: 'I'm good, no?'; to which what responds is a comportment that knows to value.<sup>30</sup>

For an aesthetic education to avoid the temptations of idealism—which include the temptations of the personal—it is necessary to ponder this comportment which knows to value. The invitation to value is one made by the text, whose genre encodes the readership it wishes to attract—not merely by the repetition of generic conventions alone, but by the addition of the novelty with which the text will own itself and address its reader. In this complex sense, genre is the repository and the machine of the aesthetic. If we wish to think the aesthetic both personally and historically, we will need genre's ability to allow a text to exist both in its own time and in ours; to be part of a historical continuum and yet be itself.

An example may help illustrate the productivity of genre as a way of addressing the aesthetic appeal of a single text. Leni Zumars's *Red Clocks* (2018) is a quiet but explosive contribution to contemporary dystopian fiction. In its treatment of the family—the inner or intimate core of a private sphere which the genre typically sets in opposition to the regime of oppression that constitutes the dystopia proper—*Red Clocks* renders the ordinary as itself unbearable, family life as itself full of pain. America's restriction of women's reproductive rights provides the formal lineaments of dystopia, but this fades into the depths of a narrative that charts the interrelationships between five women and their family histories. Read by itself or for itself, *Red Clocks* is a rich and moving novel; read for the shift it illuminates in the genre's understanding of power and pain, it becomes a provocative and productive nudge in the direction of rethinking what might make the genre shift its locus now; what has failed in the private sphere, such that it can no longer act as a source of succour and of opposition in one thread of contemporary dystopian fiction? Why could it once—or, why had it once to so act?

### *Material conditions*

Time, then, is a property of literary forms. But it is also a condition of labour. Hungerford was not wrong to raise the empirical problem of too much to read, too little time to read it, as central to the future of literary

---

<sup>30</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London 2013 [1970], p. 356.

studies. I read the personal turn as itself in part a response to the contemporary conditions of cultural production. When you no longer have a canon or consensus about what should be read but are haunted by the notion that value should guide reading, the personal can smooth over problems which may be more productive if they are confronted *as* problems. I want here to open the questions of volume and of time to a set of concerns that cannot be met by turning to the personal. These concerns are generated by the material conditions of the university in the present, the conditions—varying across unequal social landscapes—in which all the work of literary studies is done.

In *Practical Criticism*, Richards raised such quantitative matters in the context of the time necessary for reading, suggesting that some of the unevenness in the written protocols from his students could be due to ‘fatigue’:

I am inclined to think that four poems are too many for a week’s reading—absurd though this suggestion will seem to those godlike lords of the syllabus-world, who think that the whole of English Literature can be perused with profit in about a year!<sup>31</sup>

Today, the syllabus-world to be covered—to be read—is geographically wider and deeper, historically more differentiated, and may include manifestos and genres of music, films and TV series, alongside the fiction, poetry and drama of the last thousand-plus years. This dramatic enlargement is also part of the reconfiguration of ‘literature’ and its modes of study during the ‘theory years’, or the theory wars of those years, which rendered the borders between literature and other disciplines so gloriously porous that it would be difficult to classify any literary scholarship as not interdisciplinary, in one form or another. The result has been a significant growth in the volume of scholarship and in the difficulty of its textures. A good deal of seminar work now revolves around ‘secondary reading’, the scholarship tagged to the primary texts. But this has not been matched by an increase in the available amount of student time.

The students who take these seminars for their undergraduate degrees are as diverse as the repertoires of possible texts to be read; additionally, they are heavily indebted and time-poor. For a significant minority, paid work cuts their time in half. When the pandemic hit and many suddenly lost their jobs, there was little support from either their universities or the

---

<sup>31</sup> Richards, *Practical Criticism*, p. 317.



government to continue their studies. A recent US report calculated that undergraduates spent an average of 7 hours a week reading, across seven days; this didn't include other activities—assignment preparation, writing, lab work—contributing to their overall class preparation of roughly 15 hours a week.<sup>32</sup> True, it is difficult to generalize from these student data. I include them to insist on the necessity of thinking of an aesthetic education in terms of the students with whom we must make that education, if we are going to make it at all. The reading time of students today is increasingly snatched, scarce or tired time. They need more.

The same is true for staff. The period that saw such an increase in the volume of materials to be read also saw a transformative increase in student numbers and the transmutation of many permanent full-time academic jobs into 'hours', with the casualization of large swathes of academic labour. With the pandemic, those lucky enough to keep their jobs were inundated with new tasks necessary to make the 'pivot' online. The impact has been differentially distributed, with women experiencing both a greater loss in research time and increase in pastoral work, alongside the more general workload intensification. A recent blogpost from an American humanities PhD sounded a note echoed across the Atlantic:

A job market that was already dismal when I started my PhD four years ago is now literally non-existent, with hiring freezes predicted for years to come . . . Endowment losses as the financial market tanks, drops in undergraduate enrolment, further college closures, and the generalization of online lecturing will all further shrink the pool of resources previously set aside for tenured positions . . . So no, I am not getting a (tenure-track) job. None of us are.<sup>33</sup>

A 2009 essay by Rosalind Gill remains astonishingly up to date. Gill begins with a conversation between herself and a colleague:

How are you?

I am totally stressed at the moment, to be honest. Work is piling up and I'm just drowning. I don't know when I'm going to have time to start on that secrecy and silence book chapter . . .

I know, I know exactly what you mean.

---

<sup>32</sup> Naomi Baron and Anne Mangen, 'Doing the Reading: The Decline of Long Long-Form Reading in Higher Education', *Poetics Today*, vol. 42, no. 2, June 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Eli Lichtenstein, 'None of Us are Getting Jobs: Notes on Organising in the Covid University', *The File*, 16 April 2020.

I mean, I had 115 e-mails yesterday and they all needed answering. I'm doing 16 hour days just trying to keep on top of it. I feel like I'm always late with everything . . .<sup>34</sup>

Gill goes on to describe an institutional environment which either thieves time or transmutes it to high-intensity and competitive performance:

A punishing intensification of work has become an endemic feature of academic life . . . serious discussion of this is hard to find either within or outside universities, yet it is impossible to spend any significant amount of time with academics without quickly gaining an impression of a profession overloaded to breaking point, as a consequence of the underfunded expansion of universities over the last two decades, combined with hyperinflation of what is demanded of academics, and an audit culture that, if it was once treated with scepticism, has now been almost perfectly internalized.<sup>35</sup>

For a utopian project like North's to retain its suggestive power in this context requires grappling with these actually existing conditions. For it to work, for it to be as potently materialist as it hopes to be, the first step must be getting more time—which means getting more of us. If we are to help students become critics, we need more time with them; if we ourselves are to develop the principles adequate to the practice of literary criticism today, we need more time. The only way we can collectively generate more time is to have more posts created, more jobs. North's project in other words has to be undergirded by a renewed focus on higher education as a public service, a necessary public good in our crisis-ridden century. Only an increase in public funding, accompanied by the collective articulation of a counter-narrative capable of reinterpreting or repositioning the question of 'relevance' as a question of the public good—a question at once deeply personal and not personal at all—can ensure the conditions of reading upon which a programme of radical criticism would rest. There is a good deal of useful material that such a project could draw upon, amid all the wreckage of the past. If a radical aesthetic education is routed through a claim for more time, and a renewed focus on genre, we can make it work. Not to shore up any defence against our ruin—that's happened—but to figure a way out.

---

<sup>34</sup> Rosalind Gill, 'Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of the Neoliberal University', in Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill, eds, *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, London 2009, p. 228.

<sup>35</sup> Gill, 'Breaking the Silence', p. 238.