

## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2019) Review of Making Literature Now by Amy Hungerford; Mere Reading: The Poetics of Wonder in Modern American Novels by Lee Clark Mitchell; and Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing by Nicholas Thoburn. *American Literature* 91 (3), ISSN 0002-9831.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/26720/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

*Making Literature Now*. By Amy Hungerford. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2016. Cloth \$75.00; paper \$22.95.

*Mere Reading: The Poetics of Wonder in Modern American Novels*. By Lee Clark Mitchell. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 2017. x, 262. Hardback £67.50; paper £19.79; ebook £18.99.

*Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*. By Nicholas Thoburn. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2016. xiii, 372. Cloth \$105.00; paper \$30.00.

**THIS IS AN AUTHOR'S ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT OF A BOOK REVIEW IN *American Literature*, 91:3, 2019.**

To read or not to read seems to be the great question for literary studies of our time. More specifically, in a world of abundant literary production in which it would take more than a lifetime just to read the fiction of a single year (see Eve, Martin Paul, *Close Reading With Computers: Textual Scholarship, Computational Formalism, and David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 3) how can we decide what to read and how to read it?

Three recent books by Amy Hungerford, Lee Clark Mitchell, and Nicholas Thoburn respectively have, in their own ways, turned to this problem. Certainly, these are not the only titles to pursue this question of reading in the digital age. Other works on this theme that spring to mind from just within the past couple of years include David Letzler's excellent, *The Craft of Fiction* from the University of Nebraska Press; Zara Dinnen's astute *The Digital Banal* with Columbia University Press; a host of fascinating work in the digital/distant reading field, including Andrew Piper's *Enumerations* and Ted Underwood's *Distant Horizons*, both at Chicago University Press; and surely many others. Yet the triad of titles here under review showcases the distinctively different

approaches that are being adopted in the face of “literary overproduction”, as Hungerford calls it (142).

Specifically, these books turn to a type of anti-mimetic formalism (a formulation that Helen Rydstrand traces back to the work of Roger Fry and Clive Bell in *Rhythmic Modernism: Mimesis and the Short Story* (Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 37) in which a tension is observed between a literary work’s form and its representational subject matter. For Mitchell, the answer to the challenges of our age is close reading, returning to the sense of wonder we might find in the attention to the language of prose as described by Tony Tanner, which should be considered as tightly crafted as poetry (5); for Thoburn we can respond by interrogating those book-works that critically examine their own media forms within a framework of material texts (1); and for Hungerford we need to think through the labour forms and hidden narratives of emergent contemporary literature but also, perhaps now infamously, to adopt paradigms of “critical not-reading” that more thoroughly, and perhaps politically, rationalise our still under-remarked-upon cultures of the great unread, as Margaret Cohen termed them (148-63).

Each of these books works very differently. Mitchell’s approach turns to Willa Cather, Vladimir Nabokov, Marilynne Robinson, Cormac McCarthy, and Junot Díaz in its exemplary demonstration of the power of close textual attention. While it was not clear to me specifically why Mitchell’s work needed to be particularly focused upon the “Modern American Novels” of his subtitle, the Barthesian “bliss” that his book extracts from its chosen works more than pays off. For not only do Mitchell’s close readings succeed – perhaps none more so than in his demonstration of the disjunction and oscillation of the form and content of *Lolita* – but the work is also prefaced by a brilliant history of close reading that should find its way into undergraduate syllabi worldwide. Certainly, there were instances in this book where I wanted to interject with a more inter-textual

approach. For instance, Mitchell's citation of McCarthy's reference in *The Road* to a man who appears "like an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes" (184) is surely a reference to Russell Hoban's seminal dystopia, *Riddley Walker*, in which there is "some kind of thing it aint us but yet its in us. Its looking out thru our eye hoals", a fact that is here unremarked upon. Yet this is the challenge of balancing content and context with which Mitchell's work grapples and, on its own terms, nonetheless succeeds.

By contrast, Nicholas Thoburn offers a dense and rich theoretical account of what he calls a "communism of text", drawing on Adorno, Artaud, Benjamin, Breton, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and, of course, Marx for his wide-ranging analysis. Thoburn's premise is that the materiality of the book – not, that is, solely the codex – can speak to us in ways that could work against the text's literary or formal content; as a reflexive critical commentary. The most superficial example of this is the commodification of Marx's *Capital*, packaged and sold on loop ever since its authorship. However, in its conjunction of politics, aesthetics, and materiality, what I found most compelling in Thoburn's work was its astute understanding of the manifesto form. For Thoburn does not put forward a manifesto for the post-digital book, but he does analyse how manifestos work "in the future perfect", a mode in which their "claim to authority in the present *will have been* sanctioned by the actualization of its subject in the future" (27). It is this performative loop to which the materiality of the book might gesture and so, even while Thoburn reads the bookishness of books against their content, his work resonates with the sense of "oscillation" that one receives from Mitchell. The authority of form against content forever struggling along unfolding temporal lines in our experiences of reading.

Finally, Amy Hungerford's book, by now itself well established as an important text in the field of contemporary literary studies, straddles these divides of close reading and material textuality, of

aesthetics and politics. With her carefully documented histories of underground literary institutions, such as McSweeney's, through digital experiments such as the Small Demons project, up to the essentially unanswerable rejection of reading any more David Foster Wallace, Hungerford's book is a well-crafted *tour de force* of its genre. What works so well in this text is that the objections one might raise to it are already pre-rebuffed by the final page. Why, for instance, focus on the case studies that Hungerford here chooses? Well, the text asks back, why do we focus on anything? The "refusal to read [...] is not radical", as Hungerford notes, "it is normal" (162). It is what we all do every day in our selection processes for where we spend our limited lifetimes of reading. And being *honest* about such procedures of selection is the critical feature to which we should draw attention, Hungerford's work seems to imply. Lisa Marie Rhody recently wrote that "not reading is the dirty open secret of all literary critics" ('Beyond Darwinian Distance: Situating Distant Reading in a Feminist *Ut Pictura Poesis* Tradition', *PMLA*, 132 (2017), 659–667, p. 659). Hungerford suggests, though, that this need be neither dirty nor secret, but merely another part of our practice that we should make explicit and attempt to rationalise.

While it is impossible, in a 1,400-word review, to do full justice to three texts that take such differing approaches to reading in the digital age, what was perhaps most surprising to me was the connections that I forged between these books. Why should works on the material form of the book and its production in the present day find themselves sitting alongside a text that so forcefully argues for a return to close reading? Perhaps the answer is attention. How we pay it, where we spend it, and the ways in which we monetarily metaphorize it within paradigms of scarcity. For each of these books asks us to evaluate critically that most slippery of terms: the *form* of literature, in whatever form that might take.

## Contributor Bio

Martin Paul Eve is Professor of Literature, Technology and Publishing at Birkbeck College, University of London. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Sussex and is the author of five books, most recently *Close Reading with Computers* from Stanford University Press. In 2017 Martin was named as one of the *Guardian's* five finalists for higher education's most inspiring leader award and in 2018 he was awarded the KU Leuven Medal of Honour in the Humanities and Social Sciences.