

'He doesn't talk politics any more': Politics and Postmodernism; Morality and Metafiction; Nihilism and the Novel?

Around 200 pages into Thomas Pynchon's epic of the Second World War, *Gravity's Rainbow*, the protagonist – so far as it makes sense to speak of one in Pynchon's novel – Tyrone Slothrop is engaged in a discussion with his comrade, Tantivy Mucker-Maffick. Tantivy is rattled. Like Slothrop, he feels watched. At this point in the novel, Slothrop has just been involved in a seemingly-staged rescue operation of a damsel in distress from a Pavlovian-conditioned octopus called Grigory and it looks as though their mutual friend, Teddy Bloat, may have been involved in engineering the setup. Bloat, says Tantivy, “has changed” in recent days. There's nothing definite – “not a single bit of evidence” – but “since Autumn” “He won't discuss his plans after he's demobbed”. A sinister structure appears to be emerging. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, even the university is in on it, “Sure. In that America, it's the first thing they tell you. Harvard's there for other reasons. The ‘educating’ part of it is just sort of a front.” But perhaps most tellingly of all, Tantivy says, since Bloat's potential involvement, since his “change”, “He doesn't talk politics any more”.

Such statements may appeal as seeming meta-textual commentary on recent literary and intellectual history. Who among us, after all, has not read the doom-laden tracts in the LRB, in the Guardian and elsewhere of what the university has lost? That supposedly once-politicised space and utopian hope of higher education has, the familiar narrative goes, now been co-opted by quantifying forces of neo-liberalism, seeking to punish the academy humanities for their use-lessness, their esotericism but also, we are told with contradictory logic, for their force of critique. To this, I will return. In parallel, though, it is very difficult to chart a simple, but accurate historical metanarrative of the prevalence of politics when we speak about US Literature since the 1960s, the topic of this evening's event.

Is it true that “He doesn’t talk politics any more”? In order to begin to explore this, I want to open with a framing context of how academics read fiction and what they look for when they talk about politics. While much contemporary literary criticism *does* remain “political” in its reading practices, there are signs of this fraying. For in the study of contemporary fiction, the near-ubiquitous, symbolic, Anglo-American literary-critical paradigms of 'unveiling', 'interpreting', 'revealing', 'the hermeneutics of suspicion', 'symptomatic reading', or even just 'critique' – the traditional modes that allow for political readings of literary works – have several histories. While these prominent techniques are usually grounded either in revisionist Marxist approaches that focus upon the ideological socio-materiality of textual production or within a psychoanalytic excavation of a textual unconscious, there is also a clear lineage shared between contemporary literary criticism and contemporary scientific practice that emerges from the historical philosophy of idealism. For, at least in the broad outline of much German idealist thought, philosophy told us that our senses had only primitive access to an underlying truth and that the structuring forces of our perceptual apparatus overrode that truth, reforming reality in their own image. There was more than really met the eye under the transcendental aesthetic, the story went, and the phenomenon was different to the noumenon. As science developed methods to show that what we thought were solids were, in fact, mostly air and atoms, literary criticism too had to find its techniques for ‘unveiling’ deeper truths. Some kind of desired access to a further essence or thing-in-itself pervades both science and literary studies to this day. The further essence that literary studies in universities tries to pull from texts is usually a political sub-text.

In recent years, though, it is the predictability of such against-the-grain interpretative paradigms and politicized unveilings that has led Rita Felski and others to feel dissatisfied with the symptomatic reading practices that developed from the Althusserian schools, regardless of how ethically sound

such approaches may continue to seem. Indeed, as far back as 2004 Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg suggested that it was time that we “critiqued the mantra of critique” while N. Katherine Hayles has noted that “after more than two decades of symptomatic reading [...] many scholars are not finding it a productive practice, perhaps because (like many deconstructive readings) its results have begun to seem formulaic”. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus even go so far as to point out, almost ten years ago now, that although it has “become common for literary scholars” in symptomatic traditions “to equate their work with political activism, the disasters and triumphs of the last decade have shown that literary criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change”. It may in fact be, as Bruno Latour puts it for the social sciences, that this Kantian-derived mode of critique is “running out of steam”. Perhaps it is time, he has suggested, to move away from matters of fact – from conditions of possibility that highlight social construction – to matters of concern.

But these are, I note, two different things. Felski and all are calling for a turn away from the idea that we should employ critique to analyse texts. That is, a call for a type of aesthetic formalism. Latour also suggests turning away from critique – but, that is, a critique of science. For Latour, criticising science in the way that many science and technology studies fields do has led to a situation in which politicians discredit, say, climate science. For Latour, turning away from critique *is* the political gesture. For the Felski gang, it is the repetitious political readings of texts that is called *critique* from which we should turn away. This is not wholly a-political, since the new mode that Felski proposes is about reflecting works and their social entanglements. It is also, though, not the same as Latour's.

If we're going to think about politics and US fiction, then, let me give a fresh start, a new opening for this paper by offering five problematizations or critical framings that we may wish to consider

**[SLIDE]:**

1. What do we mean when we speak of “US Literature” or “American Literature”? This is indeed a problematic question that has been widely recognized. The “information for authors” section of the journal *Studies in American Fiction*, for example, contains the following phrase, inserted a couple of years ago: “Engendering conversations about forms of writing that do not succumb to traditional genres, *SAF* interrogates and redraws both generic **and geographic** boundaries. *SAF* is the only journal encompassing American literature from the North American colonial past to the United States’ globalized present.” Should we include, then, the American *continent*? Perhaps not in “US fiction”, but perhaps in “American fiction”? South American literature since the 1960s. What about recent Iraqi and Afghan literature under US occupation, or liberation as the States might prefer it to be termed? Is this less American than the homeland, that original melting pot? What of those political writers around the world who imagine America through their fiction, US Literature for sure, shaped in the shadow of the superpower, even as the authors are not themselves American in nationality. Can we, we should ask, continue to think of American or US literature as geographically contained or should we, in line with much contemporary theoretical thinking, expand our horizons to various post-national conceptions? How do we handle, in our classifications, a new set of racist policies in the States that attempt to brand certain demographics as less, or un-, American?
  
2. What does it mean to speak of politics? In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes a close link between ethics and politics: “The goal of politics”, Aristotle says, “is the best of ends; and the main concern of politics is to engender a certain character in the citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions”. Who judges the character and what is valued as “noble” might, I suggest, be problematic in an age of relativism but it’s an interesting start possibly for its didactic streak and its focus on influencing others.

Institutional politics is concerned to some extent, as Michel Foucault has more recently re-taught us, with the control of populations and to propagate normative moralities. It was the best of ends, it was the worst of ends. By contrast, we also know, in more practical terms, that politics is related etymologically to the city, the *polis*. It is, therefore, to do with the governance of labour and the space-time compression that the city brings in compacting its workforce's extramural lives into the emblematic space of Modernity. Politics extends also, though, to gender; a notable aspect since Aristotle's original politics also concerns women – but by their notable exclusion. Politics can be about bodies, it can be about religion, it can be about the individual vs. the collective. Politics is a diffuse term, from the personal to the governmental. It is hardly homogeneous. Does it even make sense to bracket the many aspects that we call “political” in the same category? In the end, I tend to think I do agree with Aristotle in some respects: politics must surely be about, in some ways, commitment to an ethical principle and its enactment through rule, to the convergence of praxis with moral theory, even if a stable set of “moral facts” cannot be available. That is, politics can be liberal, progressive, or left-wing, or it can be right-wing, conservative, or even fascistic. In the academy and in academic readings it is most often a progressive politics that serves as the standard against which we measure literary works.

3. What does it mean for a literary text to be “political”? It can mean, of course, that we see formal affinities with political theories. We might then, however, find ourselves enveloped in debates around artistic commitment, such as those dialectically waged between Sartre and Adorno in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, if we think that politics might consist of a fusion of ethics and influential power, then fiction might well possess those qualities. How it would avoid becoming didactic and overbearing is a question we might consider, though. We might also want to ask what type of influence literature has, what audiences it can reach

and, perhaps most importantly: how do, or even just “do”, political elements of short stories, novels and poetry, amid other hybrid forms, translate into action? Is it enough, we might ask, for a text to present an ethical worldview? What about action? There is clearly a persistent anxiety about the political power of literature and its translation into action. Think only of Hilary Mantel's controversial short story about a fictional assassination of Margaret Thatcher. Look only at the list of books challenged every year in the US education system. The implicit assumption of much postmodern fiction – that reality might spring from literature – has, in fact, a far longer history. What we need to consider, though, I think is just what the bounds of that power are. What forms of literature do translate into action? We should be careful not to overstate the power of literature in the mind and in the academy against the power of action on the street. As academics we are, of course, subjectively biased and prone to making such assumptions; it would be nice to imagine that there are leagues of politicised students who leave our literature courses every year and who go on to change the world. The evidence shows otherwise, though. For the most part, the pedagogy of debt incurred by studying literature in the academy teaches students that they must get jobs, enter the “real world” and leave the realm of political literature in that other space on the page.

4. What range of texts does the academy speak of, when we talk about American Literature?

This is not, contrary to how it may seem, the same as my first problematizing question. I am here rather thinking of the limitations of our own labour-power when it comes to reading. Even if we were to schematize perfectly what we mean by American Literature, what would be the underlying method by which we would select texts in order to produce statements about “US Literature”? Indeed, I find myself persuaded, time and time again, by Franco Moretti's “The Slaughterhouse of Literature”, in which he writes that “The majority of books disappear forever – and 'majority' actually misses the point: if we set today's canon of

nineteenth-century British novels at two hundred titles (which is a very high figure), they would still only be about 0.5 per cent of all published novels”. The same question of canon might apply to our thinking about American fiction since the 1960s and it is linked to my above questions about action. We may wish to consider how widespread literature must become before its political content or readings can translate into any kind of meaningful action. Does limited dissemination of political literature to a few committed individuals have the same impact as mass dissemination? Does the selective power of the market sanitize the range of political content that may enter the literary space and how are paradigms of self-publication altering this? If we, in the academy, continue to speak of a tiny portion of published work as representative of “American Literature”, ignoring the even larger problem of work that is not even published through market gatekept channels – what we might call “American” or “US” “Literary Culture since the 1960s” – then we might face additional problems of translation into action if that canon does not match a popular readership.

5. Finally, I want to ask: why think about politics in US fiction since the 1960s? Why this epoch? In some ways, we all have an answer to this that circles around May '68, the loss of an era and a dream of a counter-cultural left that was unable to recover. At the same time, though, when we speak of the long 1960s we may wish to consider other periodizations that frame this differently. Given the increasing focus on the political-economic rationality known as neo-liberalism in our present, might it not make sense to think more of the long 1980s, a period that would stretch back to the Chicago School of Economics's influential role in the 1973 coup in Chile and extend forward through the Reagan era to our present day? How has the transformation of society into a market of quantification, which is what has happened if one believes Will Davies and Wendy Brown, been reflected in the labour,

market and content around and in literature?

These are my five critical problematizations: US or American fiction as a far from straightforward term; politics as unformalized and difficult to define; politics in its literary manifestations often having at best a nebulous conception of influence and action; a limited canon that the academy's echo chamber considers to be representative; and a usually-accepted chronology that might be more pluralistic than we generally consider, at least in my experience. The way that I'd like to proceed for the rest of this talk is to relate these general observations to my specific field of interest in the post-1960s US literary scene of postmodern fiction. In doing so, I automatically fall into the trap of my fourth question.

### **Postmodern US Fiction and Ethics**

A few troubled opening remarks on race, canon and postmodern fiction. Undoubtedly, if we consult the academic canon of US fiction since 1960, there is an astonishing rise in academic reverence for a group of, predominantly white, predominantly male, writers, broadly concerned with what is termed metafiction; one of the core traits of postmodern fiction. Running from John Barth, through Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Kurt Vonnegut (to some extent), William Burroughs, Doctorow, Gaddis and Gass, even up to David Foster Wallace and Mark Z. Danielewski, a range of material emerged in which a core concern was that most Brechtian technique of revealing the mechanism; of reflexively highlighting the text's own workings.

It is important to stress, I think, though, that this is only one strand of the metafictional strain that emerges from, conveniently enough, the early 1960s onwards. A whole host of texts that we might consider metafictional, or “postmodern”, have been produced by writers across a broad range of



identities. Toni Morrison's intersections of the postmodern and the postcolonial (despite the well-rehearsed conflicts between those terms) are extremely evident in *Paradise*, for instance, where a core aspect of the novel's plot revolves around the misreading of a founding scripture of the black community that sits above the central “oven” in their town; “Beware the furrow of his brow” or “Be the furrow of his brow”. As Anna Hartnell points out, this controversy in the text is “not only” over “the role of language and interpretation but also the question of human versus divine agency”; a politico-theological line that she brilliantly links to the Civil Rights movement.

We might also wish to consider the work of Ishmael Reed, whose career has been as formally playful as Pynchon's, as polemically provocative as Burroughs's. It is indeed no secret that Reed has made a career out of grotesque and unconventional satires of American life, but also from his frequent spats with feminist movements that come across as at-least borderline misogynist. By contrast though, once more the political and aesthetic are fused in various parts of Reed's corpus. The plot of Reed's 1972 novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, for example, revolves around the advocacy of a counter-Western trickster spirit known as Jes Grew (a reference to spontaneity: “just grew”), manifest in dance and jazz. Some have argued that this fixation on folk magic – or “Hoodoo” – that pervades much of Reed's writing has broader social implications. Kathryn Hume, for example, traces Reed's Hoodoo resistance to a desire for presentness, a form of eluding the coercive structures of control that decree an obligatory preparedness against the future, an aspect that then chimes well with the core line of the (then unwritten) Pynchon novel: “to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day”.

I could go on. Percival Everett's hilarious novel, *Erasure*, is another brilliant study in playful, postmodern aesthetics coming headlong against socio-political problems of the so-called “post-racial” environment. Indeed, with the clear combined influence of the US MFA creative writing

programmes, as studied in Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, and a host of influences including Colson Whitehead, Touré, Dexter Palmer, Karen Tei Yamashita, Sesshu Foster, Sherman Alexie, Salvador Plascencia, Yxta Maya Murray, Marta Acosta feeding into Everett's work, it would be surprising if there were not metatextual overtones. But once again, most pieces read this work as a socio-political comment on race, for instance in the work of Ramón Saldívar.

But yet, it is the “great white male narcissists”, as David Foster Wallace self-deprecatingly terms the group, that are usually summoned to mind when the phrase “the American postmodernists” is brought to the fore, at least in the academic conversations to which I am privy. This may be a fault of insularity on my part. Certainly, however, there are many sources that cite Pynchon as *the* archetypal postmodernist (with DeLillo hot on his tail) and it was partially for his work that Linda Hutcheon coined the term historiographic metafiction. Likewise, Brian McHale's characterisation of the postmodern as a move towards an ontological, as opposed to epistemological dominant, is also derived from a reading of Pynchon.

This racial divide probably has something to do with the phenomenon identified by Madeline Jablon that while “Black literature has always theorized about itself”, the study of African-American metafiction by the Anglo-American academy has been historically blinded to some degree by an antiformalism that privileged the socio-historical over the aesthetic.<sup>1</sup> While, in Jablon's persuasive history, certain black commentators saw metafiction as “an invention of elite white postmodernists” that represented “the pinnacle of self-interest and support of the status quo” – an argument not so far from the continuing and perennial assaults on the form, as I'll go on to discuss – other scholars working on writing by people of colour failed to canonise several major figures because, Jablon claims – although I don't necessarily agree with this part –, they “overlooked the

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1 Madelyn Jablon, *Black Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in African American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), p. 21.

connection between stylistic innovation and radical politics”.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, we should probably pay heed to the remarks made by bell hooks in her piece, “Postmodern Blackness”: in which she notes that “As a discursive practice”, postmodernism “is dominated primarily by the voices of white male intellectuals and/or academic elites who speak to and about one another with coded familiarity.”

Furthermore, hooks points out, “It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience, one that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge.”

That said, perennial assaults on the metafictional or postmodernist form as a-political, in its white-male, supposedly canonised state, are a-plenty. David James writes, in *Modernist Futures*, of “politically abortive metafiction” for instance. Jane Flax also points towards an “association of postmodernism and amorality”, feeding back into my earlier discussion about a link between politics and ethics. But... why? How is it, I'd like to start asking here, that this critical view became so prominent when these works are, by the traditional standards and with my initial problematizations temporarily pushed aside, extremely political?

What do these traditional representations of “politics” in postmodern American fiction since the 1960s look like? Let's consider three of the canonical figures: Barth, Pynchon and DeLillo. Barth is probably at the extreme end of the tenuous spectrum when we think about politics. Much of his work is, clearly, concerned almost exclusively with the process of writing; “Lost in the Funhouse” perhaps being the best instance of this. By contrast, though, some of his works do encode specific

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<sup>2</sup> Jablon, p. 20.

political allegories into their narratives. Consider *Giles Goat-Boy*. For those unfamiliar with this text, the plot concerns the life of George Giles, a boy raised as a goat but who nonetheless becomes the “grand tutor” of “New Tammany College”, the university where he lives. The text is, as with all of Barth's work, intensely metafictional; there's a fake author and editor cover page and the novel plays with the displacement of authorial attribution throughout. What I think it is also important to register, though, is the not-particularly subtle parody of the Cold War that runs throughout this work. Two university colleges are pitted against each other in the text in a game of mutually assured destruction, with the tyrannical computer logic of WESAC sitting behind this setup. The New Revised Syllabus that is prophesied Giles will bring in his role as Grand High Tutor is a type of new thinking that will steer WESAC away from its tyrannical logic of destruction. As with most postmodern metafiction that wishes to place irresolvable ambiguity at the heart of its hermenutic project – the ludic element – it is very difficult to draw a specific political “message” from this novel. Many would claim that it is too anarchic to really have any kind of political philosophy. By contrast, though, the representation of political philosophy within a paradigm of indeterminate ethics is probably something that we could read as a political message in itself.

By contrast, although playful and metafictional, many of Pynchon's novels have always been imbued with a sort of righteous political rage, even from his earliest works. *V.*, for example, devotes an extensive portion of its narrative to surfacing the oft-forgotten Herero genocide in German imperial Sudwest Africa under von Trotha. This is framed through ironic and ethically problematic comparison to the Holocaust but is nonetheless clearly an anti-imperialist political act. Likewise, Pynchon's 1973 novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, has a strong political core, with the final chapter of the novel showing a proleptic leap from the Second World War to Cold War America, where the V-2 rocket that pervades most of the text has become a nuclear warhead, poised above the cinema where the numbed audience are instructed to sing along, following the bouncing ball. This all occurs in

parallel to an epigraph to the text from Wernher von Braun, who was the head of the Nazi rocket programme in World War 2, but then, like Pynchon's fantastical transatlantic, trans-temporal rocket, became the head of NASA after the war. The ethical line, in simplistic terms, that we might draw from *Gravity's Rainbow*, then, pertains to the genealogies of destruction and death on which much of our contemporary technology is predicated. I could go on: in *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon turns his ire to slavery and instrumental rationality, with the cartographic enlightenment logic of his eponymous protagonists drawing a racial scar across America that will foster racial segregation and damage. In *Against the Day*, it is labour politics and unions before the second world war. Etc.

Finally, for this potted summary of a particular postmodern political canon, we could think about Don DeLillo. While earlier DeLillo texts appear to be more self-referential and concerned with signposting their own aesthetics (I'm thinking, in particular here, of Ratner's Star), many of DeLillo's later novels are explicitly political; such as *Falling Man* and *Point Omega*. Interestingly, both of these novels are concerned with explicitly interrelating the political and the aesthetic. The former of these texts, clearly, deals with 9/11, but is structured around a depiction of performance art, perhaps inappropriately, some have suggested. The latter is concerned with the Iraq War but, as I have written elsewhere, does so by back-reference to the Cold War that DeLillo had earlier depicted in *Underworld*. Indeed, in *Point Omega*, DeLillo writes of Iraq “that the country needed this, we needed it in our desperation, our dwindling, needed something, anything, whatever we could get, rendition, yes, and then invasion”, a line that is eerily similar to *Underworld's* proclamation that “the Cold War is your friend . . . You need it to stay on top . . . the whole thing is geared to your dominance in the world”.

And so it seems clear that, in traditional terms, there are many many ways in which we might approach these texts as “political”. They represent political situations and, in many cases, these

works of metafiction attempt to interlink their aesthetic designs with their political representations. But where does a theory of change sit here? What is the link between these authors howling at injustice and any kind of real-world alteration? [SLIDE] Is there one?

Pessimistically speaking, I am not sure that there is. High, difficult fiction of the postmodern era is never likely to trigger riots in the street and it is also my experience that legitimate, organized protest has become totally ineffectual in shaping policy decisions. If we want to talk about the politics of such fiction, such American fiction since the 1960s, then I suggest that we need to narrow our claims to several potential realms: critique and labour. There are probably others that you may make a good case for, but I'm going to focus on these two.

The first is critique. Critique, as I would specifically frame it, sits within the Kantian and now Foucauldian traditions of examining the bounds that structure our thought in the present. What it is possible to think. For Kant, this meant trying to logically uncover the categories of perception that structure thought. Kantian critique is epistemological and ontological; what can we ever possibly know. The clearest instance of this is in the transcendental aesthetic portion of the Critique of Pure Reason wherein Kant asks whether humans can think without space and without time, answering in the negative. Foucault's revision of Kantian critique, as brilliantly set out in recent years by Colin Koopman, is to situate it in the historic. Foucault does not ask "what are the universal categories that structure our thought?" but, rather, "what are the bounds of our thinking as structured by our production as historical subjects?"

What does this have to do with American Literature since the sixties and the canon of postmodern fiction that I am here discussing? Postmodern metafiction is, in fact, a type of critique. Perhaps aesthetic critique. Metafiction is art that, from within art itself, questions the contemporary

conditions of aesthetic possibility. It is not the sole artform that undertakes this endeavour. It is only nihilistic and self-absorbed, though, in as much as critique is nihilistic and self-absorbed.

This aspect is bolstered, I think, when we absorb Mark Currie's observation, in his introduction to the aptly titled collection, *Metafiction*, that there are problems with the standard definitions of this mode. It is now a well-known fact that metafiction, as a term, arose during the height of the postmodern literary phase in the 1960s and was first ascribed to William Gass. The term is used to describe fiction that is 'self-aware', fiction that knows it is fiction, fiction that draws attention, through various stylistic conceits, to itself as a work of fiction. Major studies of the form include Robert Scholes's *The Fabulators* (1967) and his article "Metafiction" in the *Iowa Review* (1970); Robert Alter's *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (1975); Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1984); and Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction* (1984). Each of these works has contributed towards the contemporary understanding that we hold of the term metafiction. From Alter's dialectical framing of *Don Quixote* as the first realist novel, set in negational opposition to reality, the logical unfurling that fiction must be, always to some degree, about fiction itself began to emerge.

These standard definitions neglect, though, in Currie's argument, the facts that: 1.) "the idea of self-consciousness is strangely inconsistent with most postmodern literary theories which would attribute neither selfhood nor consciousness to an author" and 2.) "[i]t is not enough that metafiction knows that it is fiction; it must also know that it is metafiction if its self-knowledge is adequate", thus prompting an infinite regress. Currie moves instead, following Robert Scholes, to re-situate metafiction as a critical discourse that "dramatises the boundary between fiction and criticism", within a loose definition of "criticism". Currie's argument has merit and his subsequent discussion of the history of twentieth-century literary studies manages to convincingly situate the respective

projects of Derrida and Foucault alongside the metafictional turn, for “[t]he postmodern context is not one divided neatly between fictional texts and their critical readings, but a monistic world of representations in which the boundaries between art and life, language and metalanguage, and fiction and criticism are under philosophical attack”. This is where my argument that metafiction is a form of “critique”, particularly, perhaps, with respect to the academy, can be situated.

Critique strikes me as important and political. It is important that subjects consider the bounds of their own knowledge and the ways in which certain presuppositions – i.e. political views – are likely to be socially/historically/mediately constructed. However, critique as enacted within the novel and other forms of American Literature since the 1960s strikes me as potentially very limited. For one aspect, almost 25% of Americans did not read a single book, let alone a novel, in 2014, according to the Pew Research Centre, a figure up considerably from 1978. Unlike the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the Prime Minister of Britain and the Leader of the Opposition were the pallbearers at the funeral of Thomas Hardy, the cultural and political currents within which the novel once swam are now heavily diluted, possibly by tele-visual competitors, possibly by digital outlets. The novel still exists and is read, of course, but it is less culturally influential than in bygone eras. To overstate its capacity for triggering critical thought is, therefore, statistically insensitive.

The second is that there is also no clear link between this type of “critical thinking” and any mode of action. Perhaps the link is there but we just can’t empirically verify it. That’s a possibility to which I remain open. That said, the same kind of logical problem can be seen in the defences of the humanities that trumpet “critical thinking” with inconsistent evidence. For instance, Sarah Churchwell recently wrote of how the humanities subjects that: “The humanities shore up democracy, civil liberties and the middle classes [a telling addition]: they teach analysis, critical thinking, ethics, cultural comparison, and autonomous individual reflection; they teach history,



languages, literature and the fine arts, which refine us and are one of the means by which we define human aspiration beyond material ambitions”. She then went on to note, however, that “Nicky Morgan [the education secretary] has a humanities degree. So does George Osborne, Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, and David Cameron.” To appropriate Shylock: we taught them to “think critically” and their profit on it is that they know how to remove our funding. That said, I can find little evidence for US politicians reading fiction that contrasts with their ethical standpoints and acting anyway. In fact, the only fiction that I can find that George W. Bush read, at all, is the Weapons of Mass Destruction dossier. I suspect he was also a co-author, though.

In any case, the link between critique, critical thinking and action remains weak. It's a nice theology that we still hope there might be some kind of line between aesthetics and ethics. I'm a little sceptical, although I do believe that every little bit of ideology critique helps.

What, then, about labour [**SLIDE**], the second area to which I contended that there might still be some recoverable politics in American Literature? When I say “labour” here, I do not mean representations of labour politics, such that we find in Pynchon's *Against the Day*. I do not even mean a kind of “work of thinking” that we might see in the hard grappling of reading dense texts, the entropic conversion of our encodings and decodings that each comes with a labour “transaction cost”. What I mean is the actual work of writing, often against the tide of the political regulation of expression and, more recently, against the labour practices of big data. This, I feel, might be political.

In this light, there may be a reason to reverse my critical formulation of the long eighties and instead return to the long sixties. Specifically, we might consider, as do Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger, the 1966 Georgia trial of Robert Eli Stanley who was convicted for possessing

obscene material that was incidentally seized in a raid designed to uncover evidence of criminal bookmaking activities. As Herman and Weisenburger point out, *Stanley vs. Georgia* has traditionally been seen as less important in the grand narrative of freedom of expression because it turns on possession, rather than expression. Indeed, we know well the progression of obscenity trials and First Amendment victories that stemmed from them, through Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly* (1928), Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1966) and, of course, Burrough's *Naked Lunch* (1959). (We might also add, on this side of the Atlantic, the trial of the Brighton Unicorn Bookshop's publication of J.G. Ballard's "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan", later published in *The Atrocity Exhibition*.) What the Stanley trial gave was absolute blockage to attempts to stifle expression by prohibiting reception. In other words, although obscenity trials continued onwards to 1973 until *Miller vs. California* (in which a work could not subsequently be deemed obscene if it has any degree of "serious literary, artistic, *political*, or scientific value"), this was just bolstering the decision that readers had the right to privately possess material that expressed obscene sentiments. Privacy and freedom of expression, political hot topics to this day, were comprehensively hashed out in the American literary and legal scene of the 1960s.

Of course, freedom of speech is not a silver bullet for a sound politics. Indeed, it is a shame that those defending this principle so often have to take the side of senseless personal abuse as opposed to those clear-cut instances of political persecution. Although who judges that line is, of course, difficult to say. And yet, much of the supposedly politically abortive, or nihilistic, postmodern fiction from the 1960s onwards played an absolutely key role in the transformation of free speech in American law. If ever you wanted a verifiable causal connection between literature and politics, here is one of the relatively few areas where, empirically, we can say that this effect is truly felt. The politics of the material interface between reader, writer and the law that determines the bounds of permissible social expression for literature. The labour of testing the bounds that structure

permissible speech; locutionary critique.

A further element of political labour practice in writing – albeit one of a very different kind – is being borne out in the present moment, though. I refer to the conditions of remuneration for authors in an era of big data and computational power. Now, you may ask, what do these terms from quantitative computing have to do with remuneration of authors. The answer is: much.

While, in bygone eras of book sales, localised competition was possible under market conditions between book stores, the computational power of large, centralised retailers has changed this balance. Siren servers, as Jaron Lanier refers to them, collect information on the pricing of all competitors and, at Amazon for instance, automatically match down to the lowest possible price point. Including a zero price point. In other words, there is no way, beyond a certain time-point of automatic competitor discoverability, that Amazon can possibly be more expensive than its rivals. If this means giving away work, then this is a risk that Amazon is willing to take for the longer-term strategic market advantage that it will derive from this positioning. Amazon's pricing policy is, therefore, emblematic of the current world of money. It is not concerned with the present or the past, as paper currency once was but with a debt to the future. Amazon's pricing is, again to cite Lanier, a “memorialization of behavioural intent”, a teleological gamble that the future will be theirs. And the odds look good, for Amazon.

For others? Perhaps not so good. Although the relatively few success stories of self-publishing are held out in the style of an unrealisable but optimistic American dream, the internet has democratised speech (although the ability to speak does not mean that anyone has to listen) but is also degrading any form of remuneration for the labour of that speech. Whether this comes in the altered expectations of free content (because, I'll ironically quip, “there must be no costs in the immaterial

delivery, right”?) or through the exploitative individualist supplier rhetoric of Amazon, the political power of writers seems to be diluted by a claimed narrowing of breadth.

And yet, I wonder several things about this. Firstly, many many novels by many many people are published every year. It seems true from all that I have read that few make a living from this. I am unclear whether this is different to previous eras, though. Secondly, publisher gatekeeping of literature has always, to some degree, been founded upon an assessment of the market. Of course it varies enormously across different types of publication. A niche poetry pamphlet can't really be spoken of in the same breath as mass publishing. Is the fact that this market is contracting due to the prevalence of big data and the problematic automation of price-setting a difference of degree or kind?

I'm going to draw to a close now but end with a few summary remarks:

1. It strikes me that the way in which we have framed political engagement in literature is not a strong form of politics. I sit somewhat in sympathy with Frank Lentricchia's argument in *Criticism and Social Change* – now over 30 years old – that critique is important and that education contributes to social change. But I am more pessimistic and do see potential for the other angle, that education is a function of society. I am not naïve in thinking that demands to change the world as opposed to interpreting it will fix our mess overnight. But I am likewise unconvinced that representation and mediation of political worldviews in fiction is enough. That said, I'm sure it's possible to pick holes in this and that the work of representation of race, gender and queer identities *has* contributed to social change. Do I contradict myself. Etc.

2. There is, though, a way in which we might definitively conceive of US Literature since the 1960s, albeit bearing my problematizations in mind, as contributing to politics: in the weaker form of critique and the stronger form of labour. It is possible that the latter activity, in intersectional ways, might interact with other forms of political problem: the work of black writers and representation etc.
3. But despite all this, despite my pessimism, despite the problems of liberal humanist critical thinking and so forth, I am not sure it's true that "He doesn't talk politics any more". Most of us have some investment in continuing to read politics out of the fiction we study while many authors profess to have infused their works with political views and aspects. It may just be that the scope of politics and literature, though, to effect change is shifting below our feet, part of a matrix of culture and politics that we cannot accurately measure because there are too many interrelated factors. I'll leave, therefore, the final words to Pynchon's Brigadier Pudding: "It occurred to him to focus his hobby on the European balance of power, because of whose long pathology he had once labored, deeply, all hope of waking lost, in the nightmare of Flanders. He started in on a mammoth work entitled Things That Can Happen in European Politics. Begin, of course, with England. "First," he wrote, "Bereshith, as it were: Ramsay MacDonald can die." By the time he went through resulting party alignments and possible permutations of cabinet posts, Ramsay MacDonald had died. "Never make it," he found himself muttering at the beginning of each day's work—"it's changing out from under me. Oh, dodgy—very dodgy.""