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Department of English and Humanities, Birkbeck College.

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‘He Doesn’t Talk Politics Anymore’: The Role of Politics in Contemporary US Fiction

Dr Joseph Brooker, Department of English & Humanities

On Thursday 18th May I introduced an event about the politics of US fiction since the 1960s. This was part of Arts Week 2017, and a contribution to the theme of art & politics which was one element of this year’s series of events. Though I had been involved in organizing the event, its substance was provided by two speakers, Professor Martin Eve and Dr Catherine Flay, which leaves me in a position to reflect and report on it.

Eve’s title came from Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), where it refers to a character in the Second World War who comes under suspicion because of his reluctance to discuss politics. Had the same happened, Eve asked, to US fiction in recent times? To answer this question he problematized a number of the terms involved. What, for one thing, was now the meaning and scope of ‘American literature’: could it even, he provocatively asked, include writing from Iraq and Afghanistan under US occupation? What is the best meaning of ‘politics’ itself, and how should we consider politics’ translation into literary work: should this be measured in a utilitarian fashion by the work’s effects, in the form of action taken by readers influenced by fiction? A further issue is the limits of the corpus that we study: the canon of contemporary US fiction, Eve argued, is very narrow compared to the real range of what is published in the US, and does not necessarily correspond to what most people are reading – insofar as they are reading at all, as a recent statistic recorded that 25% of people did not read any novel in a year.

Eve also took note of the recent turn against ‘critique’ in literary and social studies. Scholars like Rita Felski have argued that ideology critique and the performance of symptomatic readings of literary narratives have become formulaic, and requested new models of critical reading. At the same time Bruno Latour in the social sciences has suggested withdrawal from the ideological critique of science as the revelation that science is ‘socially constructed’ can give excessive succour to authoritarian politicians who cast doubt on the evidence of climate change. Eve noted that these two critiques of critique in fact move in somewhat different directions and need to be viewed as distinct.

Eve noted that African-American writers might make a significant contribution to a discussion of the politics of fiction, but also that they had often seemed marginal next to a certain group of white writers such as Pynchon, Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace. Eve pointed out that black writers are often viewed primarily as black writers rather than as undertaking aesthetic experiments without special relation to their ethnicity – as Wallace, for instance, is often seen to do. The remarkable and

prolific novelist Percival Everett has wickedly satirized and problematized these questions of racial identity and critical framing in his own highly self-conscious fiction.

Eve cast doubt on whether the metafiction of Pynchon, DeLillo or John Barth should be considered politically effective in any direct way, despite its political content. He noted that the cultural status of the novel was not what it had been, and observed that former President George W. Bush was not known to read fiction, save perhaps the government dossiers he had commissioned. (An audience member stated that Bush in 2006 had in fact taken Albert Camus's *The Stranger* on holiday: beach reading indeed.) But Eve sought to move the argument on to what kinds of politics fiction might be involved in. In the 1960s, Eve noted, literature had been involved in the expansion of free speech, as legal trials against prohibited publications had foundered. Now, he stated, a different kind of politics was in play around the labour of writing, the remuneration involved, and the threat to bookselling posed by Amazon. The landscape sketched here was bleak, but Eve did not disclose how writers were using their literary labour as a form of activism against these new material conditions.

Dr Catherine Flay gave a full response to Professor Eve's rich and diverse lecture. She proposed that in offering a space of play beyond market imperatives, fiction might offer models of ethics not typical of the contemporary world of work. She noted that fiction, and indeed literature more broadly, had shifted in significant ways since the 1960s, making a carefully particularized history necessary. The poet Allen Ginsberg among others, Flay reminded us, once sought to contribute as political activist. Where Eve had cited George W. Bush's lack of interest in fiction, Flay cited the current President Donald J. Trump who in an interview had been asked what he read, and had responded by pointing vaguely to shelves of books. One thinks of *The Great Gatsby* whose titular figure has assembled an impressive library of books: they may be unread by Gatsby, a character remarks, but at least they're real. I thought it striking that neither of our speakers, in considering such reading habits, had mentioned President Barack Obama, who late in his period of office spoke at length to novelist Marilynne Robinson about the importance of fiction in fostering empathy and imagination. Perhaps Obama, temporarily, had already entered the notorious obscurity of 'the day before yesterday'.

In a short period for questions, lively responses came from the audience. One audience member noted that the term 'populism' had also been absent, defining it briskly as 'politics for people who don't like politics', and suggesting that complex postmodern fiction was rather antithetical to the political populism of the present. Another asked about distinctions between ethics and politics, and another suggested that if fiction lacked political ambition this reflected what feels like a lack of individual agency to effect change. I wondered whether a comparison of genres would reveal some differences here: whether fantasy, for instance, allows for individual agency in

a way that the contemporary realist novel might not, or how the entrapping social webs of crime fiction would compare.

Professor Eve had concluded that his reflections on the politics of fiction needed to be cautious, as these issues were 'shifting below our feet, part of a matrix of culture and politics that we cannot accurately measure because there are too many interrelated factors'. The contributors to tonight's event pointed us to some of these diverse factors that we ought to keep in mind if we ask whether fiction 'doesn't talk politics anymore'.