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Contemporary Textual Scholarship, Canon, and Publishing

In her broadside against Althusserian-derived symptomatic reading, *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski has recently noted, on the matters of value and canon, that we (academics) undervalue many hidden types of publisher labour: “publishers, advertisers, critics, prize committees, reviews, word-of-mouth recommendations, syllabi, textbooks and anthologies, changing tastes and scholarly vocabularies”.¹ On the other hand, Robert Eaglestone laments in his “Contemporary Fiction: Towards a Manifesto” that these sites of publishing labour “do not see the point of” academics.²

What has happened here such that academics working on contemporary fiction are often under-invested in studying the labour practices of the publishing industry that conditions the production and reception of literature, even while feeling under-valued for our own role in promoting such work? As Eaglestone puts it:

“I think that every academic working in contemporary fiction has at least one bad story about trade publishers and agents. While some can be very helpful, in the main agents, and trade publishers are very unhelpful and resistant to academics. They do not see the point of us, which is odd as we sell many, many thousands of copies of their books to our students (nearly a captive audience, in fact) and more importantly we create the intellectual and cultural infrastructure within in which their business grows. (‘I studied her in college so I downloaded the new one straight away’.) Yet this, too, reveals that one issue in contemporary fiction is what we might call the ‘contemporary history of the book’: the ways in which the business of publishing helps to shape and control contemporary fiction. There seems to be a dearth of research into this aspect of the field.”

How did this happen?

Contemporary Fiction in the Academy

Contemporary fiction as a sub-discipline began in the 1890s at Columbia and Yale, according to Ted Underwood. The field has, for most of its life, been subject to ridicule for an attempted immanent knowledge; that is, for adopting a standpoint from too far inside its subject matter that nonetheless

¹ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 170.

² Robert Eaglestone, ‘Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto’, *Textual Practice*, 27.7 (2013), 1089–1101 (p. 1096) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2013.840113>>.

professes to an objective knowledge or a set of informed value judgements. In particular, the subject is derided for, as Eaglestone notes, problems of canon and selection. It is to these that I will first turn.

Problems of canon and selection are double-edged. Those who study the medieval period, for instance, have a certain claim to canon through historical survival, namely that over the years certain manuscripts have been preserved through a combination of active intervention and chance circumstance. This means, of course, that such a canon is subject to the criteria of selection from bygone ages (as well as chance). On the one hand, this yields “the only canon we have” – a canon filtered in part by constant choices of preservation – while, on the other, it gives us a canon selected and filtered by biases, prejudices, and historical cultural norms.

Even within more recent periods of study, though, we have problems of value. Franco Moretti writes, in 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature' of mid-term literary history that “if we set today’s canon of nineteenth-century British novels at two hundred titles [...] they would still only be about 0.5 per cent of all published novels”.³ For Moretti, invested as he is in broad-field literary trends with a totalising desire akin to early-twentieth-century Russian formalism, the problem here is that value judgements for contemporary selectivity are used to speak of a literary period as though it covers the full output.

The same can easily be said of contemporary literary studies. We speak of “contemporary fiction” but really we mean a small subset of work. Even with the proliferation of work within different genre studies fields, there is actually more published than it is possible to read. It is, therefore, often in the delegation of evaluative labour to prize panels, so well charted in recent days by James F. English, to which we turn. Incidentally, we see the same type of outsourcing of evaluation in the academy with peer review. We get others at journals or book publishers to review the work and then evaluation panels fall back on those anonymous aggregations up to the brand

3 Franco Moretti, ‘The Slaughterhouse of Literature’, *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly*, 61.1 (2000), 207–27.

level of journal or book publishers. But I don't want to go too far in that direction today.

What I want us to think about instead is the way in which our problems of canon in contemporary fiction are problems of labour. They are part of a political economy of the book industry and book prizes, counterbalanced against academic concerns of teachability (usually predicated on length), the worthwhile politics of canon (from postcolonialism to world literature), and reading labour time of academics. Thus, while Eaglestone opens his manifesto with the *epistemological* question: what forms of knowledge differentiate fans from academics? (he concludes that it is not really what we know but how disciplinary spaces are structured around issues of crisis that is at stake), I would turn to a different point: for academics, reading is labour.

Certainly there are other spaces where this is the case, even ones that Eaglestone himself covers. Journalists, book reviewers, prize panellists and their ilk certainly also read as labour. But such readers are *also* most-likely dilettantes compared to hardcore geek fans. But, in this way, we can redefine many of the problems of canon – alongside the more well-known problems of the legacies of empire etc. – as shortages of labour time amid competing demands on that time. This goes further than John Guillory's ascription of “cultural capital” as the driver of canon formation, but it is thinking in the same terms, since all of Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic capitals are interchangeable, in round-about ways, with economic capital.

If, instead, academic reading time and canon formation are attributed to matters of labour, we are also able to chart the rise of certain digital practices within a more useful frame. Distant reading is a matter of reductive but nonetheless labour-saving methods that use the untiring repeatability of computational tasks to garner statistically informed deductions about novels that one has not read. This will, predictably, horrify many who work in literary studies departments. But it is part of an acknowledgement of the fact that more contemporary fiction is published every year than it is possible for a single person to read in a lifetime (in 2009, according to Bowker data, over one million novels were published in the US in English alone). Critics such as Matt Jockers also

model their large scale digital readings on small-scale experiments, such as his Syuzhet software, which attempts to discern sentiment traits of plot arcs based on a set of readers reading and scoring small subsets of texts by eye and honing the software to those readings, as a sort of calibration.

Without going into a huge degree of detail, there are many reasons why such methods are unlikely to gain large-scale traction for contemporary fiction, but suffice to say that, in this country, they are bound up with copyright and EU criminal law for the removal of Digital Rights Management technologies. Yet, this raises for me again the question of the “contemporary history of the book” and what it can achieve. If, in other fields, the limitations of such histories are gestured towards by the development of new methods, then what hope do we have in the space of contemporary fiction?

The Contemporary History of the Book

While calling for a “contemporary history of the book”, Eaglestone also claims that he wishes to be neither “a glorified journalist or modern antiquarian, nor simply a generic critic reproducing basic critical gestures”. Indeed, for Eaglestone, it is important that we remain “critics of contemporary fiction”. What, though, does the term *critic* mean in the study of contemporary fiction? How is it different to other periodisations? How are we spending our labour time?

What we talk about when we talk about “criticism” in the space of contemporary fiction is, in fact, by-and-large, the precise school of critical work at which Felski is taking aim. That is, it is the Althusserian epistemology, as set out in *Reading Capital*, that most strongly underpins contemporary ideas of “critical reading” or “literary critique”. By examining textual presuppositions, it becomes possible, Althusser claims, to see what a text *cannot say* as a condition of its ideological positioning within its own time. In this way, and although only an explicit articulation of a set of practices that had been building for some time, “symptomatic reading” was born; a mode of reading that conceives of texts as ideological byproducts with spoken and unspoken

components – “sights and oversights” – that can be read critically and reflexively.⁴ That is, texts exhibit symptoms – usually contradictions or conceptual difficulties – of the unspoken ideological environment in which they were written; these symptoms are the “*absence of a concept behind a word*” and they become the excavation site of most methodologies in literary studies.⁵ As these two metaphors of space put it – a concept *behind* a word and a site of *buried* interpretative treasure to be *dug up* – symptomatic reading poses a text-behind-the-text, a presupposition of “the existence of *two texts*” with a “*different text* present as a necessary absence in the first”.⁶ This epistemology, in other words, is one in which the effect of producing knowledge is conditioned by structures of ideology and empiricism, which can be detected below the surface of any writing.⁷

The form of criticism that is *not* normally invoked when we say that we want to remain “critics” in the space of contemporary fiction is *textual* criticism. Textual Studies or Textual Criticism refers to the philological study of identification of the variants of a particular manuscript or printed book. Traditionally used when studying historic period literature, there are a range of methods one can deploy to produce a critical edition from various witness documents and to re-approach the archetype document. This is ironic, since such a mode would yield us *direct* instances of unseen texts lurking behind the one in plain sight. It is also a study of the diverse labour forms that contribute to textual emergence.

In the study of historical periods, this had some clear merit. With multiple diverse variants claiming fidelity to an original copy-text, Shakespearian scholars, for instance, were keen to understand the transmission histories. However, the complicated legacy for the study of contemporary fiction is one within which the author is both central (interviewed, biographised and scrutinised) and absent (in a hermeneutic paradigm still derived from the high Theory era). This led, in the 1980s, to Jerome McGann working against the move to recover an ur-text and instead

4 Louis Althusser and others, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. by Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015), p. 17.

5 Althusser and others, p. 32.

6 Althusser and others, p. 27.

7 Althusser and others, p. 69.

advocating for a collection of always-“corrupt” texts that, in aggregate, comprise the social and historical event of a work.

For, to return to my theme of labour here, the work of publishing an edition is a co-labouring environment in which many figures contribute to the creation of various textual versions that remain in circulation but that are often not examined by contemporary critics. For instance, in 2015 I discovered that the two editions of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* that were in circulation were extremely different to one another. Yet, entire literary-critical books have been written on this novel that do not appreciate this fact. Sometimes, they get away with it. Patrick O'Donnell spends quite some pages in his book examining the split of the varying portion as ‘5/8th to 3/8th’ across the narrative break in the text. This holds up in both editions. Other critics are not so fortunate. Nicholas Dunlop has argued that the fact that purebloods cannot distinguish between fabricants is ‘a matter of myopic hegemonic perception’, based on the fact that Sonmi says ‘Pureblood [naked] eyes cannot discern these differences, but they exist’ (Dunlop, 2011: 221, n4). Yet this line does not exist in the E edition of the novel, only in P. This would weaken such an argument in the E text by connecting a claimed myopia to the eyesight reference.

What does it mean for our close-reading practices that texts in the contemporary age are *as prone* to variations in transmission and editing as they ever have been even while there is no substantial effort devoted to textual criticism? Indeed, we actually have a *unique* opportunity in the study of contemporary fiction to examine these processes. Speaking with the authors and publishers themselves is not possible for many of our colleagues working in far-distant periods. In our case, it is possible and we should take more opportunity to pursue this. For our interpretations are laughable when they do not realise that for some readers the text is a totally different experience.

That said, while the contemporary digital age offers some opportunities by way of textual scholarship, it also offers some alarming challenges. Just because our texts are born digital – and they almost all *are now* born digital, despite the Jennifer Egans and Don DeLillos of the world who

begin their thinking in analogue media – does not mean that we have access to them in digital forms that can be used for computational analysis. But it also comes with archival challenges. Gone are the days when we could discover a manuscript version lying around in some back drawer of a publisher's office. Instead, versions are bandied back and forth by email, sometimes without even “track changes” turned on within the documents themselves. What happens to these email archives and digital working environments after an author's death still remains a matter of contention, let alone the resourcing challenges of digital preservation systems that we would need to actually study such artefacts.

So while we talk, in popular circles, of surveillance culture and an omnipresent digital panopticon, for contemporary textual scholarship we are entering, or already in, a dark age. Commercial concerns; a scholarly culture of critical close reading that at once disdains but also values authorship; the death of manuscript culture; and a false belief that technology has perfected the publication process have each warped the study of contemporary fiction away from textual genetics, textual scholarship, and textual criticism.

This is not to say that it does not happen. For instance, Tim Groenland studies the manuscript versions of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, a “novel” that was unfinished at the time of the author's death and that was reassembled from fragments by his editor, Michael Pietsch.⁸ Groenland argues, as do I in the work on *Cloud Atlas*, that it is possible (and indeed necessary) to close read the genetics of a text within its own thematic bounds. This was spurred, though, by the incompleteness of the final work; the only time that textual criticism seems to rear its head.

Also now available, as just another example, are the papers of Toni Morrison, held in Princeton's library. These include handwritten drafts of *Beloved* and other material that will

⁸ Tim Groenland, “‘A Recipe for a Brick’: *The Pale King* in Progress”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 2017, 1–12 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2016.1271766>>; see also John Roache, “‘The Realer, More Enduring and Sentimental Part of Him’: David Foster Wallace’s Personal Library and Marginalia”, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.1 (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.142>>, which examines Wallace’s marginalia.

undoubtedly supplement our understanding of Morrison's oeuvre. For Eaglestone, though, the “‘rule of thumb’ is that the contemporary is the last ten years”.⁹ The eventual availability of manuscript drafts does not seem to fit easily within such a world for the study of *contemporary* fiction. It is also, as I have demonstrated – and as can also be seen elsewhere, such as in Andy Weir's *The Martian* – the case that *published editions are different to one another* at the moment of publication. Yet, this somehow usually falls underneath our radar.

The point that I'm driving at here is that the hermeneutic techniques of contemporary fiction alone seem insufficient to fully capture the literary environment within which we work. Trans-textual variance occurs in published works, but we tend not to look across texts in this way. Often, though, it provides telling evidence that can undo our interpretative work. Without wanting to unfairly demean her work, someone was speaking a few weeks ago of the changes in dialogue from the novel to the film version of *Cloud Atlas*. The changes only existed, though, if one had read the UK edition. The lines were precisely the same in the US edition. Indeed, I'd suggest that we need more of this type of thoroughness in edition checking whenever we make hermeneutic assertions so that we are not caught out by our own lack of knowledge.

New Labour Forms

I've turned, throughout my remarks today, to the question of labour, in a deliberately provocative move with respect to the quotation of the seemingly anti-Marxist work of Felski. I want to close with a few additional remarks, though, on the labour environment of the production of contemporary fiction and the fact that our “contemporary history of the book” must be aware of shifting stances on authorship.

I have become convinced, in my own study of character-based recurrent neural networks, that we are about 30 years or so out from computers that can write seemingly meaningful prose fiction at novelistic length. A dangerous prediction to put on record, I am sure. Indeed, I trained a

9 Eaglestone, p. 1095.

network on the literary studies journal *Textual Practice* and, after just 24 hours of training, could produce sentences and bibliographic entries that read in the style of the journal while never actually occurring within them. For instance, my network told me that ‘I shall find our intellectual values, by rewriting their very ties’. It also wrote, of its own false footnotes, that they ‘provide the fraud of the epistemological practices of knowledge’. Footnote items included ‘Slavoj Žižek, *Live Fiction*, trans. Rushdie and Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Bohestock Press, 1994)’; ‘John Spottisley, ‘The privatized climax’. (1929), p. 4, emphasis in original’; ‘Robert Garsh, *The Performance of the Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)’. As of 2017 we have already witnessed the rise of mass business and sports journalism being generated by computers.¹⁰

Certainly, computational authorship is changing the way we write already. Is the use of an automated spellchecker a machine writing? It certainly changes the word that an author may have typed. What about a thesaurus that suggests wholly different words? Grammatical checking that alters sentence structure? My word processor, LibreOffice Writer, even provides automatic completions for words based on the characters that I begin to type, conditioning future possibilities through suggestion. As William Winder has put it, ‘[f]ormatters, spell checkers, thesauri, grammar checkers, and personal printers support our writing *almost* silently’.¹¹ For Winder, the question comes down to whether, in our use of such prostheses, computers are ‘typists or writers’. Or, put otherwise: is the Great Automatic Grammatizator theorized by Roal Dahl as a type of machine-organ that one “plays” to write different by type or degree from other forms of writing aid? We certainly find that ‘our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert’, as Donna Haraway put it many years ago.

In considering our own labour limitations and the way that we have turned to machines to help solve this, I also want to suggest, finally, that we need to consider a host of other labour

10 Tim Adams, ‘And the Pulitzer Goes To... a Computer’, *The Guardian*, 28 June 2015, section Technology <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jun/28/computer-writing-journalism-artificial-intelligence>> [accessed 15 April 2017].

11 William Winder, ‘Writing Machines’, in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, ed. by Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 492–516.

functions as conditioning textual production in the digital age. Academic publishing has also encountered this dilemma of representing labour, even while there are efforts to use computers to mine papers at high volume ('distant-reading'). High-energy physics experiments such as those conducted at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) require diverse types of labour forms in order to conduct their work. However, since academic systems of hiring, promotion, and tenure are geared towards authorship of research outputs as their primary measure, we arrive at the somewhat curious state of papers with over 5,000 authors, as in the case of the recent Higgs Boson experiment, credited to G. Aad *et al.* (where listing the '*et al.*' consumes twenty-four pages of the article's thirty-three-page total).

It is toward this distributed labour function of authors, programmers, network engineers, sound artists, typesetters, copyeditors, proofreaders, legal, finance, acquisition editors, digital preservation experts, and many many other pluralised and sub-divided labour forms that I believe the contemporary history of the book should turn its focus.