

Redeemable Plots

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OVER THE LAST FIFTEEN YEARS, GLOBAL ECONOMIC, INSTITUTIONAL, POLITICAL, AND social disinvestment in the humanities has contributed to what John Guillory has recently called a ‘crisis of legitimation’ (xiii). By over-emphasising the political importance of contemporary literary culture, cultural discourse has largely focused on cementing literature’s political agency. Because humanities disciplines, in Guillory’s view, occupy positions of structural weakness, there is no winnable argument about the social relevance of criticism. ‘So long as there are scientists at work on a cure for cancer’, he notes, ‘the humanities will have a nearly insurmountable task in making a case in the public sphere for their great, if less obvious, social benefits’ (109). Feeling themselves, their works, and their institutions to be on shaky ground, critics have fallen into the habit of ‘romanticising’ the power and importance of literary criticism’s ability to advance progressive political positions or debate liberal or democratic functions.¹

Defences of criticism—specifically literary criticism—seem to conflate several, commonly known, economic, political, and environmental threats into one: declining enrolments in English degrees, the closures of English departments, the

¹ See *Democracy and the Novel in the US*, special issue of *American Literary History* 35.1 (Spring 2023), <<https://academic.oup.com/alh/issue/35/1>>.

banning of books by Black thinkers.² For many, the shadow crisis for criticism is the existential threat that we are all facing, that of the climate crisis. Criticism under these conditions is both incredibly difficult to produce but also incredibly important to sustain. To look at it another way, as David James has summarised, '[n]ever has a field been more eager to meet the formidable task of ensuring our endeavors in the classroom still seem momentous and necessary, given the no-longer-slow violence of environmental catastrophe and escalating disparities in social welfare, security, and opportunity' (396). Putting aside the question of whether this is the best strategy to be pursuing in the face of environmental collapse and immiseration, eagerness alone may not be enough to protect against the dire future Guillory predicts—where art may exist without a robust system of critique, deemed 'a luxury that can no longer be afforded' (387).

If this paints a miserable picture, my view is that it isn't an irrevocable one. In one account that offers a useful summary, the social benefits the humanities contribute are those that pertain to illuminating structures of 'power, discourse, historicity, race, class, gender, narrative, subjectivity, social justice, representation, dissent, sovereignty, and resistance', as well as 'ideas that either define or require urgent scrutiny of our historical moment, such as precarity, environmental destruction, bare life, dignity, knowledge, information, work, wealth, and death' (Meneses xii-iii). While there is no special claim for literature over other arts or social science disciplines to the study of injustice, there is also no denying that the dialogic predisposition of literature tempts readers towards shimmering, magical thinking. And though literary critics, as agents of cultural adjudication and experts on dialogue, plot, and character development, are not immune to cultivating allegorical narratives about the specialised virtues of literature in an era of polarised political and cultural discourse, imminent environmental catastrophe, and social injustice, 'one of the signal strengths of humanities scholarship', Peter Coviello avers, 'lies in the capacity to think contradiction. The pressing incommensurability in spheres of legitimacy, value, and effectiveness: this is only one scene where that capacity can serve us especially well' (86). While the effects of activist literature on readers' politics remains to be seen—if I read a novel that depicts activism or advocacy, am I encouraged to action myself?—it is worth keeping in mind that the effect may be the opposite of what we think: as James reflects, 'redemptive forms allegedly distract us from our responsibilities and dissuade us from action' (405).

The Victorian novel is not exactly a redemptive form—and John Frow's familiarity with the social machinations that so define its plotting may not have been the spark to action that sits behind his essay, 'On Intergenerational Justice' (Frow).

² See for example: the closure or restructuring of English departments (Birkbeck, Sheffield Hallam, Roehampton, Wolverhampton), or the censorship of Black thinkers and writers in Florida, Texas, and other red states in the US.

But Frow's use of a literary trope is an intriguing hook into the broader question that has been rigorously exercised, as he rightly notes, in moral philosophy and economic policy. Indeed, the literary trope here seems to be pivotal: as an object of study, even Victorianists don't claim that there are lessons to be found within for the contemporary reader, but Frow's mobilisation of the recurring 'cursed codicil' (24) allegorises a type of intergenerational injustice that will be familiar to younger generations who have acquired thousands of dollars of student debt, have been locked out of housing markets, are facing historically low wages and job insecurity, and are facing uncertain futures marred by environmental collapse and misery. The world inherited by the young is a manifestation of the 'poisoned legacy' of capitalism, neoliberalism, populism, and misogyny, where injustice lies in the self-interested 'stewardship exercised by those who have had it in their temporary care'.

While John Rawls' concept of 'just savings' models a theoretical contract between generations, Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*, Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, and Balzac's *Père Goriot* not only plot what happens in lieu of good faith intergenerational wealth transfer but also use character types to elide the gap between what is supposed to be reassuringly fictional and what can be deemed as feasibly real. In her argument about type in the novels of George Eliot, Catherine Gallagher points out that while the real individual is 'the given data of the world', the novel's type—the species—'is that which one never expects to encounter in actuality; it is to be grasped only by an abstracting effort of the mind' (62). Writing more broadly about typicality in the novel form, Yoon Sun Lee notes that Gallagher's categorical manoeuvre here shows something ingenious about how types—say, for example, generational types—'cannot actually be found or encountered in the world but only in the mind; thus, they carry with them already a strong hint of the fictional' (445). Inverting this observation—generational types are inherently fictional constructs—might sound obvious, but 'the softening and hardening from instances to generalities and back again' that occurs when novels present us with recognisable tropes or types 'reassures the reader that this fiction is always connected to the stuff of the real, that the type may be ideational but it has fed on life' (Gallagher 63).

Two other arguments about novelistic typing in the Victorian novel are relevant here, and to this essay—because, as Lee argues, it is '[t]he phenomenon of typicality' that 'makes the novel's representation of the world distinctive' (444). The first is Alex Woloch's view that the existence of the type is both the consequence and the expression of social structural inequality. Social interactions are predicated upon a kind of competition that is reflected in the affinities and tensions between types. The second is that, in Lee's own analysis, 'there is a kind of deep time in the novel or behind its plot, the time, perhaps, of a species or of commonality, that asserts itself only through a certain affect of decline or

deficiency' (454). So, in Balzac's *Père Goriot*, the father gives away every material possession that holds value, and because this action ensures 'a disastrous end, he gains sublimity as a type equally in and against the world' (459). This strikes me as particularly revealing: the father-type, who spends everything or ties up inherited wealth in convoluted moral conditions, is able to preside above the world. When it comes to the kind of intergenerational conflict that Frow turns his attention towards, both social competition (for resources, security, and status) and the pronouncement of decline are encoded in failed stewardship.

These days, it is not the patriarch, or even older generations, that hold the purse strings. Frow rightly notes that 'agents of transmission' are 'nation states, political parties, corporations, privileged social classes, and only in the last instance a citizenry with a stake in a future world' and that 'no country and no socially advantaged group is willing to take the lead in reducing its own prosperity for the sake of a common future: that the future is held hostage to the interests of the present' (26). The world's wealthiest are not only profiting from causing and exacerbating climate crises but also morally benefitting from such profits: instead of investing in climate change action they squirrel away for themselves bunkers in countries like New Zealand.

One of these species is typed in Eleanor Catton's eco-thriller *Birnam Wood* (2023), a clear version of someone like Peter Thiel, recast as tech entrepreneur Robert Lemoine. Lemoine, like Thiel did, is in the process of buying New Zealand citizenship by contributing financially to the country's economy via a local business. Instead of a far-right radio station, it is the left-leaning, Shakespeareanly named, eco-collective, radical gardening outfit Birnam Wood in which Lemoine wants to invest. Lemoine's own portrait of his character, however, reveals the extent to which the species is more dastardly than the likes with whom he is getting into the proverbial bed would expect:

As far as they knew—as far as they would ever know... [h]e was simply a far-sighted, short-selling, risk-embracing kleptocrat, an incarnation of unapologetic zero-sum self-interest, a radical misfit, a 'builder' in the Randian sense, a genius, a tyrant, an obsessive, a prophet, a status-symbol survivalist hedging his bets against any number of potential global catastrophes that he himself was doing absolutely nothing to prevent, and might even be taking active measures to encourage if there was a profit to be made, or an advantage to be gained, in the pursuit. (79)

Not just a bad guy after a quick profit, then, Lemoine buys the novel's central plot of land in order to mine a remote National Park for rare earth metals, a market largely controlled by China. Another type: the group of idealist young radicals who

run the activist gardening collective. Via a meet-cute engineered by New Zealand law, these two types—the American billionaire and young idealist—come together to plot a typical transfer of assets. In one scene, tied up in a debate as to whether the group accepts money from Lemoine, the protagonist, Mira, acknowledges that accepting a downpayment clearly given in order to cover up specious intent is a compromise. The deliberations are those that many non-profit organisations have had: what value do principles hold? In the end, no one wins—replicating what Lee argues is ‘the fate of the type’: to ‘decline, even as the species propagates itself’. One might extend this to say that this is also the fate of both the progressive idealist and the imperial-technocratic-extractionist.

While collective action might be undone by such entropy, much of the current inaction on climate change on an individual level lies in what Heather Houser has termed ‘infowhelm’, an inability to assimilate the sheer volume of information circulating in the public sphere about climate crisis, mass extinction, and land exhaustion (Houser). Infowhelm does not occur in a vacuum, however, and is allowed to flourish in the murky dismissal and distortion enacted by those in power. On the level of state or nation, climate inaction stems from the destitute level at which democratic accountability is allowed to languish. Such inaction has been categorised by theorists including Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and Slavoj Žižek as a rise of *postpolitics*, in which ‘politics—generally understood as the actions undertaken by individuals and collectives to examine, question, challenge, and redefine for the better the fundamental assumptions that govern civic life—is constantly under the threat of being neutralized’ (Meneses vii). While at one point, protests in New Zealand stopped the government of the time mining national parks,³ in the UK, grassroots activism, like strike action to protect universal healthcare or protests that urge the stoppage of all new fossil fuel contracts, increasingly reveals a fundamental inability to effect change. This is not simply because those in power refuse to listen, but because new legislation threatens to imprison those who protest and stop those who wish to strike.⁴

When yearly COP discussions (United Nations Climate Change Conferences) only move global mitigation strategies onwards incrementally, we have to wonder whether consensus politics, underpinned by dialogue, is no longer a strategic or desirable option. What’s more, it may be an option that allows too much comfort to flourish. Nothing sounds more alluring than a dialogic strategy. The novel’s

³ Large marches took place between March and July of 2010 to protest the tabled suggestion from the National government of the time to mine New Zealand’s national parks. See ‘New Zealanders Prevent Opening of National Parks for Mining, 2010’, *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, <<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/new-zealanders-prevent-opening-national-parks-mining-2010>>.

⁴ The aim of the Public Order Bill is to increase police and judicial power with the aim of convicting those undertaking peaceful protest. At the time of writing, it is being debated in the House of Lords and seems likely to pass.

distinctive capacity for polyphony unfolds, as Mikhail Bakhtin has shown, as 'not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world' but 'a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world' (6). Here, they 'combine but are not merged in the unity of the event' as 'subjects of their own directly signifying discourse' (6). But while this works in novelistic worlds, a diversity of viewpoints that are riven by power imbalances surely prevents, rather than hastens, workable change for the global community. Moreover, as Juan Meneses has shown, such overtures to consensus in politics draw heavily on flawed dialogic structures, which are 'merely a spectacle of tolerance controlled by the dominant voice and is designed precisely to prevent any meaningful change from occurring when authoritarian, antidialogic, or simply oppressive practices are either unfeasible or no longer tolerated' (4). Not a polyphony of equal voices, then.

Reading Frow's essay, I thought mostly of Edward Said. Whatever we make of the polemical thinking that literary scholars perpetuate about the political functionality of criticism, there is no doubt that the ideological confrontations the future holds for us as citizens necessitates that both sides possess equal access to the privileges of a 'critical consciousness' (Said 28). Even 'in the midst of a battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another', he believed, 'there should be criticism, because there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for'. But what turning to Said emphasises, perhaps against our own desires, is that criticism is not the singular property of the literary critic. Simply acknowledging the fields of Indigenous studies, Black studies, and refugee studies, to name just a few, demonstrates that there is a long history of criticism outside the context of literary professionalisation, which positions criticism as the mode through which systemic injustice is apprehended and opposed. No rights can be fought for without the faculties criticism engenders and our rights in the context of the climate crisis are no different. The best path to ensuring there is just access to the long history and practice of criticism for future generations is surely to advocate for structural upheavals, particularly around how we materially value humanities education as a whole: to abolish tuition fees, forgive student debt, and fund higher education properly and fully. Because though the difficulty lies in the fact that 'thinking is a laborious enterprise', as Coviello has argued, 'no less so when transpiring under conditions of collapse' (86), persisting with criticism is essential for our survival whatever form the climate apocalypse takes. In this context, some sentimentality for epistemological remediation doesn't seem to be politically bereft after all.

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