

# Trouble at the Mill

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**I** GOT MY CURRENT JOB WITH THE AID OF CLOSE READING.

In the extremity of a job interview, my Dean asked me what pedagogical techniques I used in the classroom.

After thinking for a while, I took a gamble. 'Close reading', I mumbled. I really needed this job.

'Oh yes?', she enquired, her eyebrows rising. 'What do you mean, precisely, by that?', she asked.

'I mean, ahem, that is, I kind of... project the text of the reading up on the screen, and, uh, I ask the class to read it with me.' The sentence hung in the air for a moment, before salvation arrived. She liked it. A lecturer who reads to his class! How quaint!

I got the job. On such contingent launch pads are the modern academic career vaulted.

The irony of this exchange has not been lost on me. What I was explaining to my hiring committee was not, in fact, close reading. It was simply reading. Of the set

text. Perhaps the most basic task we can ask of students. On the other hand, in the contemporary academy, simply reading a text can seem like a radical act. How many university teachers can truly hold their students to the careful study of a series of texts?

This is not the beginning of a rant about our dumbed-down education system. Still less is this a lament about the smartphone-crippled attention spans of contemporary youth. My students put a lot of effort into their reading, often in a second or third language, and I am proud to teach them. My point is rather to observe that reading of any kind—professional, leisurely, incidental—seems to be an increasingly arcane and *recherché* business these days. My students are smart, passionate and worldly. It's not that they don't like to read—not exactly. It's more that they've grown up in a world that in which prose is a digital medium. Their primary way of understanding the world, it would seem, is the mediated digital orality of the iPhone video (Papacharissi; see also Burgess).

We shouldn't be surprised that university students, even graduate students at a major university, find reading challenging. But isn't the difficulty of the material precisely what we expect? As John Guillory observes in a chapter on 'the problem of lay reading' in *Professing Criticism* (2022), 'professional reading is a kind of work, a labor requiring large amounts of time and resources' (331). This work often manifests as collegial and conversational, leveraging specific disciplinary methodologies and techniques. Almost all of it is carried out in academic departments, in universities.

### **The Eclipse of Professional Reading**

The question of whether professional reading is in decline is more complex than it first appears. On the one hand, higher education around the world has grown massively since the end of the Second World War (Schofer and Meyer). On the other hand, it is hard to deny the prevailing atmosphere of gloom that has enveloped many in the academy, especially amongst those employed to read and teach works of literature—a sense of decline that Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon have called, not without irony, a 'permanent crisis' (Reitter and Wellmon). Guillory is firmly in the declinist camp. 'Long ago, literary education was the chief requisite for a voice in the public sphere; that day is over' (101), he notes, and it's hard to disagree. Much of the reception of Guillory's book, including a searching review essay by Merve Emre (Emre), has understandably focused on his views of the diminishment of literary theory as a discipline, and the concomitant crisis of academic employment for literary theorists. While Guillory argues, I think correctly, that much of what we understand by terms like 'orality' is a backwards-looking imposition of naivete by subsequent linguists and literary theorists, he seems rather more pessimistic about the prospects for reviving literary theory by

returning, as Rita Felski (Felski) and Eric Hayot (Hayot) have tentatively canvassed, to belle-lettrism or 'post-criticism' in an increasingly post-literate world; 'a postcritical program of teaching and scholarship', he argues, 'cannot practically be modeled on reading as it actually happens outside the academy' (94).

Guillory's most perceptive analysis might be his championing of a more engaged future for the discipline, especially around the study of lay reading. The problem of lay reading, as Guillory calls it, is part of a far larger crisis: the problem of reading altogether. From this perspective, Guillory contends that academic literary criticism has concentrated on close reading and tightly held disciplinary methods. In doing so, it has allowed itself to largely ignore the wider reception of literary texts. Widening the focus to examine the reception of texts and the pleasures of everyday reading points the way to a more generous and engaged literary discipline. One way criticism could do this, Guillory argues, is to take reading for pleasure more seriously—as an ethical end in itself, in other words. With reference to an epigram of Barthes, Guillory defends the ethical project of both lay and professional reading as if the pleasure of reading really matters. 'Many lay readers very much desire the improvement of their reading experience', he argues, and academics should respond in the first instance by gaining 'a better sense of what lay reading is' (342).

Lay reading is surely an important development. Indeed, when looked at beyond the confines of disciplinary 'deformation' (3), lay reading—what Tobias Skiverern has described as 'the various affective, institutional, and experiential dimensions of non-academic reading'—begins to look like the main game (Skiverern 162). Skiverern is concerned that the turn to lay reading (if there is one), somehow 'risks undermining the academic status of the postcritical scholar' (163). The success of postcritical scholars such as Rita Felski would suggest otherwise, but in any case, the various other risks to the academic status of scholars, postcritical and otherwise, loom larger and more urgently.

Whatever the threats, some things really are worth studying. Literary scholars have much to contribute to our understanding of literary audiences, and by extension, the reception and appropriation of story itself. Value statements about the contribution of scholarship can be asserted; there is clearly a lot of useful research still to be undertaken. The work of James Procter offers an interesting example. Examining the reception and dissemination of Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart*, Procter asks what lay reading can contribute to the field of postcolonial studies. The answer, he argues, is not just that we can learn useful aspects about the reception of the work that move beyond professional-theoretical interpretation frames, but also that an examination of the lay reading of Achebe's novel might 'bring us closer to an understanding of the popular

pleasures mobilized by a text, and its conspicuous global circulation and consumption in the present' (Proctor 197).

### **The Search for Value**

Professors often worry about the future of their disciplines. It's understandable that as enrolments drop and universities start to slash away their humanities departments, scholars begin to question whether professional literary scholarship should survive. It doesn't help that a prevailing spirit of neoliberalism creates deep suspicions about any sort of study not directly articulated to material human benefit—crudely coded as graduates getting jobs and industries making profits. As Guillory notes, 'So long as there are scientists at work on a cure for cancer, 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).

The curing-cancer comparison is a great epigram, but its validity collapses on closer inspection. The modern research university has spawned astonishing advances in medical and materials science, including most recently the mRNA vaccine underpinning the COVID vaccines that saved millions of lives. But much of what goes on at university is not devoted to the solution of pressing human needs. Neither the performing arts school nor the astrophysics department can lay much claim to immediate improvements for the basic living conditions of ordinary people. Moreover, we can't actually tell which disciplines will save our lives. Science is serendipitous, and neither university administrators nor government policymakers are easily able to predict which discoveries may go on to change the world, for the better or worse (Murayama et al 2020).

The mRNA vaccine is a good example: a remarkable scientific achievement, it languished largely unrecognised for decades, because coronavirus research was considered risky and unprofitable (Dolgin). Indeed, future Nobel Prize winner Katalin Karikó was at one stage denied tenure at the University of Pennsylvania, because her department harboured doubts about the 'quality' of her research (Murray). Human thought (and university promotion committees) often run over crooked trails. The immediate ends are often less interesting and valuable in the long run than the lacunae, the excursions and the downright accidents. Who is to say that the next really big idea won't emerge from a literature department?

### **Reading as Work**

Guillory is interested in professionals: scholars getting paid, readers who expect to be remunerated. 'This labor', Guillory continues, 'reading for a living, is compensated as such, by a salary, along with all the perquisites attached to the professional career' (331).

Except, of course, it increasingly isn't. Anyone who has worked in a contemporary university, including Guillory himself, cannot escape the vast reservoir of underemployment and precarity that grips these institutions. Modern universities are awash in short term and insecure labour: the majority of the Australian university teaching workforce is in either casual or fixed-term contract employment (NTEU). As Guillory laments in a chapter 'On the Permanent Crisis of Graduate Education', fewer and fewer professionals are being paid to read for a living.

It hasn't always been thus. Literary criticism was once a discipline on the rise, propelled by a potent mix of policy, demography and the Gallic cool of 'theory' (see: Paul de Man). The ascendance of academic literary studies in universities across the world was, in most ways that matter, a political triumph, in which universities rapidly expanded with very significant public investment (Marginson and Considine). University massification was an implicit or explicit policy goal for many nations, including the US, UK, Australia, and many of the EU member states (Trow). Academics gained employment in English and other departments in large part because there were many more students who wished to study their discipline, including graduate students, who might even have harboured dreams of future employment as academics themselves.

The post-war expansion of higher education inevitably created new opportunities in expanding departments. As Peter Salmon reminds us in a lovely essay on Georges Perec in the *Sydney Review of Books*, in the 1980s, Australian universities were confident and munificent enough to invite significant international figures, such as Perec and Jean Baudrillard, to their institutions for guest lectureships—a level of cultural and literary ambition that seems sadly beyond the much diminished language and literary departments of the post-millennium (Salmon). Graeme Turner observes in his book *What's Become of Cultural Studies?* that for a period running up until the 1990s, it was possible to carve out new disciplines such as cultural studies, even getting to coveted departmental status in a number of Australian universities (Turner).

What's changed since the high-water mark of post-war university growth is the tolerance various political forces have for the vitality and power of universities. Globally, higher education has grown substantially since the hey-day of critique. And yet the cultural and disciplinary confidence of the humanities has retreated. A lapsarian spirit is on the wind. As the economic and intellectual status of universities waxed, so did the suspicion and eventually fear felt by those excluded from the benefits and values of the university class. The problem became personified in the figure of university presidents and vice-chancellors on multi-million dollar salaries. Politicians such as Britain's Michael Gove and Florida's Ron

DeSantis have made much sport attacking academic expertise *tout court* (Hofmann). Many scholars and journalists, often drawing on McLuhan, have called this turn ‘postjournalism’ or ‘postliteracy’ (Miroshnichenko; McLuhan), but the stiffer gale that blows is the phrase we now hear often: ‘post-truth’ (McIntyre; Sismondo).

Guillory sensibly eschews the mushrooming scholarly debate about ‘post-truth’ and the ‘death of expertise’, but such debates can’t readily be escaped from. Any examination of disciplinary decline in the context of growing political hostility must confront gathering storm clouds on the horizon. Knowledge claims require justification, and even the most doctrinaire of constructivists must none-the-less grapple with some form of verification. Better literacy—either better ‘media literacy’, or simply better literacy of the classic kind—won’t help. As one prominent scholar of conspiracy theories observes, ‘debunking conspiracy theories is not possible, not professional and not productive’ (Harambam 105).

Guillory’s diagnosis of the problem is, if anything, rather too mild. The decay of enlightenment rationality progresses on more fronts than the literary, affecting large swathes of disciplinary knowledge that ordinary political discourse was once happy enough to leave to the realm of expertise. It’s notable, for instance, that many well-educated professionals fall prey to fringe conspiracy theories and alternative epistemologies (Harambam). 9/11 Truthers, Q Anon adherents and pseudolaw-spouting sovereign citizens are functionally literate (as Rita Felski has noticed); indeed, they are often capable of authoring long treatises and manifestos (Felski). Their worldviews are complex, intricate and internally consistent—which will be of little assistance to them when making their case to the magistrate or the tax office (Netolitzky). Moreover, different conspiracy theories are extremely diverse. They emerge from different concerns, agitate in different communities, and often make profoundly different untruth claims. Whatever else we may say about these actors, they are capable of reading and comprehending difficult and complex primary source materials.

As scholars under authoritarian regimes have long realised, political questions about the future of universities and the humanities cannot be wished away (Berkaroglu and Barnes). Populist forces assail the very notion of the good that liberal institutions such as universities rest upon. Paradoxically, as universities seek to make ever-more extrinsic and materialistic justifications for higher education as an engine of knowledge-industry economic growth, the socio-political climate turns against universities from wider groups in society, including those who have missed out on, or never had access to, a university place. The sociocultural moment has turned decidedly against universities and the educated professionals they accredit. While many on the left decry the increasing corporatisation and privatisation of higher education (Giroux), many in the centre

and right are fixated on the supposedly all-conquering ideology of 'woke' progressivism (Haidt and Lukianoff). Governments find universities an irresistible target for criticism, especially when they have to fund them.

The threat to less nakedly instrumental disciplines such as literary studies is also internal. University executives are by no means committed to saving any particular discipline, or even the humanities more broadly, and the broader 'common sense' of universities as trade schools for the professions and industry retains its iron grip on policymaking sensibilities (Marginson and Considine). When considering the impending closure of significant parts of the Academy, more specific concerns about the fate of a generation of graduate students looks too small a frame of analysis, confusing a small rockfall for an avalanche upending the landscape. Perhaps the appropriate frame of reference is not so much elegy, as eschatology.

### **The Little Magazines Won't Save Us**

A deformed discipline, at an intellectual dead-end, struggling for relevance: it sounds bad. As Emre notes in her review essay, 'the profession of literary study as it is currently institutionalized in the university may not be the place from which the journey toward a future criticism begins' (Emre). Perhaps the aspiring scholar could find succour outside the institution? And indeed, Guillory looks to the rag-tag enthusiasm of the digital public sphere as one possible island to swim towards. 'These are sites (for the most part) of intellectual exchange on the internet, new versions of "little magazines", such as *n+1*, or of journals such as *The Point*, as well as the now vast proliferation of blogs on cultural matters, some of which host high-level exchanges', he writes approvingly (277).

I read this bit with interest. It was precisely this real of 'intellectual exchange on the internet' that I was fleeing when I went for my university job. For roughly two decades, I had been working as a critic and writer on the internet. In the early 2000s, for instance, I scratched a modest living out of freelance criticism, regularly filing three to four reviews and columns a week. Short pieces were paying a couple of hundred dollars each, and in a time of much lower inflation, it was possible to satisfy basic living costs with regular publications. Reviewing was, just possibly, something close to a living wage for at least a small number of critics working across daily newspapers and little magazines. Digital writing never came close to paying as much, and the story of freelance rates of the past decade has been one of slow but relentless decline. As the Australian critic Anwen Crawford noted in a self-published 2022 zine essay, 'I'm one of those sad freaks who wanted to be a writer as soon as I could hold a pencil, but at this stage of my life I have stopped dreaming that I will ever earn a full-time living from it'.

Off campus, and on the streets, the health of literary analysis would also seem to be in decline. The decline of the low press has in many ways been one of the most dramatic cultural changes of the post-millennium. A whole stratum of everyday literary work, newspaper criticism and jobbing reviews has more or less vanished—as Marx and Engels would have it, melted ‘into air’. The change has indeed been industrial and political-economic, as policymakers took decisions which ensured that the commanding heights of the cultural economy would be controlled by Silicon Valley robber barons (Giblin and Doctorow). A brief efflorescence of blogs as sites of genuine independent publishing has given way to a poorer and more concentrated mediascape of large platforms as walled gardens, controlling and algorithmically serving feeds of short user posts. Key sites of popular culture, like the popular music ‘street press’ or the neighbourhood bookstore, are dwindling or disappearing altogether (Fell; Striphas). Some new sites of independent criticism and analysis have emerged, of course, notably as podcasts and personal newsletters, some of which are indeed ‘monetised’ in a private subscription model that would have been instantly familiar to the pamphleteers of Victorian London or Second Empire Paris. But, as a very large body of scholarship from the cultural and creative industries has now established (Gu; Banks), much of this labour is either completely unremunerated or irregular, precarious, freelance and poorly paid. In Australia, global structural forces squeeze even this constrained horizon, as local critics and indie publishers attempt to compete with international exemplars based in New York or Stockholm.

Perhaps the hardest question Guillory asks us is whether any optimism is justified. As Peter Hall and David Mamet are both said to have remarked, ‘the theatre is always dying’ (Gontarski); maybe criticism is too. In this longer arc, the deprofessionalisation of literary criticism asks many of the same questions already urgently posed to other parts of the labour force, such as culture. The fate of professional reading then, may well be something closer to that of other professions in a deindustrialising economy, such as journalists, critics, illustrators and print workers (Banks and O’Connor). Guillory gestures more than once towards the political economy that has structured the industrial and socio-political changes he writes about, without quite turning his full attention to it. Indeed, one way of understanding the current state of affairs, in which there is Pharaonic inequality and Robber Baron concentration at the commanding heights of the economy, is as an inherently political settlement (Slobodian).

Guillory knows where this could be going, because he’s alert to the growing levels of union organisation among American graduate teachers, in a process that could almost be called class consciousness. And indeed, the remarkable growth in union membership for American university educators is one part of what may be the beginning of a new wave of union growth and militancy in the US. In Australia and



the UK there have also been notable upticks in union activity in the higher education sector, with a long wave of UK strikes and protracted industrial unrest and legal action in Australia. The form that this industrial action has taken is recognisable, even traditional: grassroots organising of immiserated labourers, followed by campaigning and striking in an effort to win higher wages and better conditions. In a remarkable essay on organising graduate educators at Yale, Alyssa Battistoni writes that the task of the university union organiser is in many ways similar to workplace organising across other industries. ‘The task is to persuade people that *they* matter’, she wrote: ‘they know they usually don’t’ (Battistoni).

### **The Point is to Change It**

For those prepared to read Guillory’s book as really a book about industry change, there is much to glean. If the reasons for critique’s decline are really political, then political responses can be found. If we accept that there may be economic and political reasons for the low and declining status of the arts and humanities, a range of possible remedies present themselves; if political power can be massed to use them, there are tools available. As Justin O’Connor notes in *Culture Is Not An Industry* (O’Connor), bare materialism is a poor guide book for the average human’s wellbeing. ‘Our needs involve social and psychological elements’, O’Connor writes, ‘which are as essential to any account of the good society as are the material basics’ (108). O’Connor points out that stories and symbols are inherently human:

Peasant icons, songs of work and grief, oral narratives passed on between generations of enslaved groups, collective markers or sacred spaces, liturgies and rituals—these have been present in the very earliest records of human existence. These suggest an ontological, evolutionary propensity to make symbols, signs, and metaphors fundamental, and unique, to humans-in-nature. (118)

As Guillory remarked in a 2022 interview, the study of literature seems to be ‘redundant’, or other ways ‘slowing down’. What is required is nothing less than the revivification of the field through new techniques and perspectives—which would entail ‘resituating of literature both in the discipline and in the media system, a task that is almost too large to contemplate’ (Guillory and Swoboda). As many of Guillory’s closer readers know, he does not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater: ‘In my view’, he writes, ‘the autonomy of professional reading as a university discipline must be defended... Conversely, lay reading must be defended too’ (Guillory 342). It’s a big job, so we’d best get started.

Helen Small, at the end of a careful exploration of the analytically vexing debate about whether the humanities can be said to have ‘intrinsic value’, or rather value

‘for its own sake’, ultimately ends up back at Cardinal Newman and his much-discussed claims about the ‘idea of the university’ (Newman). The humanities *can* claim legitimate value, Small argues, including as an end in themselves.

If one admits (*pace* Newman), alongside knowledge for its own sake, pleasure, work, interest, affect—all ‘for their own sakes’—one has a range of modes of engagement with the objects of study that have, like those objects themselves, a legitimate claim to value as an end. (173)

One of the darker ironies of the current assault on the Academy from the populist right is that many of its own texts and techniques are being turned against it. Steve Bannon, for instance, is a fan of Antonio Gramsci (Zerofsky; Hart); Michael Gove gave a speech drawing heavily on William Gladstone’s Third Midlothian address at the very time he was radically upending British education policy (Gove). It is easy to write off the intertwined nature of politics and literature as cliché, but the enemies of the humanities are all in on narrative.

In a wide-ranging 2018 speech to the Melbourne Writers Festival that drew disparately on the songlines of Western Desert elders and the novels of Patrick Chamoiseau, the Australian novelist Alexis Wright argued that ‘the human mind is eternally hungry for stories’. Beginning from that supposition, there can scarcely be any question that we will continue to critique them. Literary criticism will survive, not least because one day the politics will again suit it. As Jacques Derrida pointed out late in his life, ‘no democracy without literature; no literature without democracy’.

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