

Studying literature today: a talk

Simon During

Anglophone literary studies between about 1920 and 1970 are to be understood, I think, as one of the twentieth-century's most significant and original intellectual accomplishments. And to understand where literary studies stand today it is important not to forget that.

So before I turn to their contemporary situation let me offer a little detail on what I mean by this claim about literary criticism's accomplishments.

20thc Anglophone literature studies (henceforth just "literary studies" with the understanding that the history I am talking about was indeed pretty much limited to Britain and the US) were inaugurated in essays that T.S. Eliot published as *The Sacred Wood* in 1920.¹ They were a conscious rejection and correction of the modes of literary studies then in place, and in particular of philology, literary biography and what we might call genteel taste making.

Eliotic literary criticism was based on four main propositions:

1. successful literary texts were impersonal in the sense that were not primarily to be understood as expressions of personal emotions, thoughts or values but rather existed in a tradition for which reading and writing were practices of surrender to the literary tradition or to the "world" of literature.
2. The primary task of the critic was not interpretation but evaluation or judgment (and thereby the construction or endorsement of a canon), and this could only be performed by close attention to words on the page, i.e. on what came to be called "close reading".² Critical judgements were not an expression of a private taste but the result of a trained understanding of how literary language works and can be used.

¹ This remains understudied. One excellent overview is given in Chris Baldick, *Criticism and Literary Theory 1800 to the Present*, London: Longman 1996.

² The phrase is used in I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (p. 195) but becomes more widely current in the US after the war among second generation new critics. Thanks to Jonathan Kramnick and Virginia Jackson for discussions about this.

3. Western modernity had fractured its own larger ethical, religious and cultural traditions. At the level of the individual, everyday life experience was typically unevenly balanced between thought, emotion and will. Liberalism was insufficient to sustain the culture against social and psychic depredations.
4. Reading good literature stood apart from other experiences available in the modern world since it continued to offer experiences that were not disjointed and instrumentalized, or at least glimpses of what such experiences might be.

On the back of this program, the English department (pretty much a post WW1 invention) became, arguably, the most exciting and popular institution in the academic humanities (but not just the academic humanities) for the next fifty years. It changed received understandings of what literature was: how to read and experience it, and which texts matter most.

This does not mean that literary studies didn't undergo mutations and incursions over the period. Or that there that did not undergo internal splits. These splits happened most of all around these questions:

1. whether literature was autonomous or whether its study had moral or political value. This was sometimes taken to be debate between aestheticism (à la the American new criticism) and moral criticism (à la Leavisism named after F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, arguably the most influential and important Eliotic critics of them all).
2. the degree to which form and genre needed to be taken into account. This mattered because the Eliotic lineage, in its strictest forms, downplayed genre.
3. the degree to which an understanding of history and historical context mattered to literary judgments. In the fifties, and especially in the US, more radical forms of ahistoricism emerged especially in the "myth criticism" associated with Northrop Frye, which thought of literature as formed within timeless mythic structures.

4. The degree to which the canon could be confined to the corpus Eliot (or the Leavis's) endorsed, and, how in particular, to resuscitate the romantics (in whom emotion and thought were radically disjunct) and how to deploy literary criticism on contemporary writing.

At any rate this variegated disciplinary formation produced path-breaking and exciting works for fifty years. Let me list the most obvious of these as substitution for further description and argument (this list is a collective effort, based on Facebook threads):

- T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (1921); Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (1921); J. Middleton Murry, *Problems of Style* (1922); I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924); T.S. Eliot, *Homage to John Dryden* (1924); I.A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (1926); John Livingstone Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (1927); Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927); T.S. Eliot, *For Launcelot Andrewes* (1928); William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930); George Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930); F.R. Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930); Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (1931); Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932); Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934); William Empson, *Some Versions of the Pastoral* (1935); Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime* (1935); Richard Blackmur, *The Double Agent* (1935); Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery* (1935); C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (1936); Allen Tate, *Reactionary Essays* (1936); L.C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (1937); John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (1938); Yvor Winters, *Maule's Curse* (1938); Derek Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare* (1938); Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and her Art* (1939); Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold* (1939); Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941); F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (1941); Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (1942); Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947); Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947); Rosamond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (1947); F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948); T.S. Eliot, *Notes towards a definition of Culture* (1948); Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History* (1948); Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *The Theory of Literature* (1949); Helen Gardner, *The Art of T.S. Eliot* (1949); Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950); Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951); Reuben Brower, *Fields of Light* (1951); W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (1951); R.S. Crane, *Critics and Criticism, Ancient and Modern* (1952); Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction* (1952); F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (1952); M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953); Dorothy van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953); Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (1953); John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage* (1953); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: technology and the pastoral ideal* (1954); W.J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (1955); Allen Tate, *The Man of Letters in the Modern World* (1955); R.W. B. Lewis, *American Adam* (1955); Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (1957); Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957); Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957); Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957); Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (1957); Robert Langbaum, *Poetry of Experience* (1957); Yvor Winters, *The Function of Criticism* (1957); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (1958); Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (1958); Earl Wasserman, *The Subtler Language* (1959); Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959); Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and Morality* (1959); Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960); Graham Hough, *Image and Experience* (1960); Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of*

Fiction (1961); S.J. Goldberg, *The Classical Temper* (1961); Fredric Jameson, *Sartre: the Origins of a Style* (1961); Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett; a critical study* (1961); Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961); William Empson, *Milton's God* (1961); Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (1962); John Bayley, *The Characters of Love* (1962); Winifred Nowottny, *The Language Poets Use* (1962); Reuben Brower and Richard Poirier, *In Defense of Reading* (1962); Morse Peckham, *Beyond the Tragic Vision* (1962); D.W. Harding, *Experience into Words* (1963); Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin* (1963); J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God* (1963); Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (1963); Harry Levin, *Gates of Horn* (1963); Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (1964); C.K. Stead, *The New Poetic* (1964); Angus Fletcher, *Allegory* (1964); Barbara Hardy, *The Appropriate Form* (1964); Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (1965); Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder* (1965); Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica* (1966); Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere* (1966); Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966); George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (1967); E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (1967); Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (1967); Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure* (1968); Hugh Kenner, *The Counterfeiters* (1968); Mark Schorer, *The World we Imagine* (1968); J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1968); Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings* (1969); Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970); Rosalie Colie, *My Echoing Grove* (1970).

An impressive list, as I think those of us who have familiarity with at least a fair proportion of the works that it includes would acknowledge.

But who knows these books today? Their formation now belongs to the past, and its memory is, I suspect, endangered.

I wonder, were I to give this talk in Cambridge or Berkeley even, how many of these works would be known there? People might know a few of them related to their specific fields, but I suspect that a sense of 20th century Eliotic literary studies' adventurousness and accomplishments requires a grasp of the corpus almost in its entirety. And that barely exists. Otherwise put, this formation now belongs mainly to intellectual or perhaps literary history.

What caused its dissipation?

Its falling apart had many causes— but I would emphasise these:³

³ I have addressed these issues from a different point of entry in “When literary criticism mattered,” in *The values of literary studies*, ed. Ronan McDonald. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2016: 120-136.

1. the impact of what we call in shorthand “1968,” which itself went in several directions.
 - a. it involved a new mode of politicization of culture and knowledge, including the charge that received canons and traditions (along with received disciplinary formations) were instruments of hegemony, and in particular of global European, white, patriarchal power. Out of this, a suite of emancipatory movements emerged in literary studies and elsewhere: civil rights, feminism, anti-colonial or postcolonial, queer. Interpretation and evaluation were displaced towards the political thought like this (i.e. towards what is sometimes now called, “identity politics”), and works began to be read in terms of their relation to these emancipation movements. They were either celebrated as upholding and extending the cultures of previously oppressed groups (whole new canons were established). Or they were denounced as being complicit in white patriarchy etc. in such a manner as to fuse social critique and literary criticism. And English departments expanded by finding lines for feminists, African Americanists, postcolonialists, queer theorists....
 - b. 1968 also names a new form of cultural democracy positioned against so-called “elitism”. From this point of view, which was most clearly expressed in certain adaptations of Bourdieu, affirmation of high culture, including the upholding of literary canons, was to be thought of as a means of acquiring the cultural capital that helps maintain an unequal society.⁴ Cultural democracy thought like this is consonant with identity politics, since they are both positioned against the old elite power structures. But, arguably, cultural democracy ultimately posed a stronger threat to literary value and judgment, since it insisted that what kind of book you like is primarily a matter of personal taste.

⁴ The strongest analysis of this moment remains John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital: the politics of literary canon formation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993.

- c. In this atmosphere, earlier “structuralist” movements were taken up mainly because they had no overt commitment to evaluation and canon-formation. Structuralism took all kinds of forms in the literary studies after about 1970, including a philosophical radicalization of new criticism as “deconstruction” by Paul de Man and many Derrida followers in the States.
- d. At the same time, “the literary” itself was increasingly delivered over to sociology. As an example, let me quote Tony Bennett in his *Outside Literature* (1990) writing about Roland Barthes’s *Sur Racine* (1963):

Barthes argues that literary history...should concern itself with the examination of literary functions—of production, communication, consumption—and their determining institutional conditions. “In other words” as he puts it, “literary history is possible only if it becomes sociological, if it is concerned with activities and institutions, not with individuals.” When posed this way—historically, institutionally, functionally—the question of literature’s being is radically transformed...From the point of view of these concerns, the study of literature becomes “the study of techniques, rules, rites and collective mentalities”.⁵

For this way of thinking, the study of literature need involve no love of, or commitment to, literature. Today this disabused, sociological view of the literary has become more or less doxa I think among advanced intellectuals who don’t find in themselves what is sometimes called “literary subjectivity”.

2. Society, culture and technology themselves were transformed in the fifty years after 1920.

⁵ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature*, London: Routledge 1990, p. 8.

- a. Print was increasingly displaced by film, broadcast and digital media. And to this day literature remains connected to print. This displacement, happening more or less at the same time as the intensification of cultural democracy, has meant that cultural capital is no longer easily accrued by knowing about and “loving” canonical literature. This has blocked one key reason for studying literature academically. It also meant that traditional canons have no place in English departments themselves, which increasingly indeed are involved in interdisciplinarity, the study of non-print media, teaching creative writing and communication etc.
 - b. From the late seventies on, as I am arguing, neoliberalism mainstreamed cultural democracy and instrumentalized and quantified all kinds of practices, including cultural and academic ones. In this situation, interest in the high literary traditions comes to be regarded, somewhat paradoxically, both as the property of the elite and as functionless. So, in particular, in the Anglophone world there is today no widespread support for spending “tax payers’ money” on the literary humanities (or the humanities *tout court*). This lapse of support for the humanities under neoliberalism is institutionalized in the form of what is often called the “managerial university.”
3. Globalization or what we might call global neo-liberalism has effected what earlier anti-imperialist movements could not: it has dethroned the West from its monopoly on world power. That provides the context in which European literary traditions, including Anglophone ones, are becoming just one element among many in “world literature,” an old term we now hear much more of.
 4. Literary studies have become thoroughly professionalised. When it comes to writing this means that they are increasingly self-enclosed and self-referential. The point of an

article or even a book is weighted towards contributing to the discipline, that is, to positioning an argument or a finding in relation to the scholarship in place. This constitutes an increasingly thick mediation between critical writing and its actual objects or topics. More research needs to be done on the topic, but one thing that marks literary criticism after the seventies is the sheer density of citations to other scholars. Eliot, Leavis, Trilling, Empson etc almost never referenced other scholarship. Most of us do not much else. And this involves a barrier to engaging literary criticism's original purposes. Scholarship-in-place, partly organized around fashion, is becoming less a mediation than a barrier to literary studies' legitimation and core business.

This, then, is the background we need to understand to think about literary studies as they exist today.

Let me sum up the situation by making just four points:

1. Eliotic literary criticism is over and cannot be resuscitated. What we have to do, however, is to remember its accomplishments, which do perhaps retain a capacity to feed movements and formations to come.
2. the great wave of 1968 emancipation efforts is almost but not quite exhausted intellectually (although it is certainly not politically exhausted, as Trump's election makes clear). That for instance is a message of Rita Felski's recent widely read *The Limits of Critique* which seems to think it is possible to give critique away almost entirely. And the intellectual exhaustion of 1968 emancipation movements is true even though identity politics of one kind or another still often organize both literary scholarship and hirings.
3. It is becoming clearer, I think, that a strong discipline of literary studies cannot just accept what I am calling cultural democracy. It has to accept that it is an activity

carried out by what Leavis called a “minority,” and probably also it needs to accept that it is ultimately grounded in maintaining and making canons.

4. Last and most important: literary studies have also yet fully to come to terms with either literary studies’ worlding or their marginalization in the contemporary capitalist world system. But, increasingly there are efforts to do so.

Here I would point, for instance, to Pheng Cheah’s recent, *What is a World? Postcolonial literature as world literature*. From one point of view, *What is a world?* is written from within identity politics: it mounts an “eighties” argument for how postcolonial writing can create alternative worlds that can help free us from global capitalism. But what interests me more is how it thinks about worlding not just spatially, but (in the wake of Heidegger and Arendt) philosophically in ways that break with identity thinking.

Let me offer two brief passages from *What is a World*:

World literature is an active space of transaction and interrelation. What is important is the dynamic character of world literature and not the content of the ideas that are exchanged. What is of greatest worth is the ethos generated by the transaction. The world is only to be found and arises in these intervals or mediating processes. The world is constituted by and, indeed, is nothing but exchange and transaction.⁶

This understands the “world” in which literature exists as constituted not by particular values and themes but simply by movements and connections, which are, for Cheah, always future-directed. Because world literature is cross-cultural, because it cannot appeal to any single tradition or lineage, it is primarily just transactional. But this does not mean it lacks all “normative force,” e.g:

If we take the liberty of extending what Heidegger says about poetry and art to literature in general, the phenomenological idea of worlding is important to rethinking world literature’s normative force in two respects. First, the world is grounded in a nonanthropologicistic force of temporalization that is prior to and makes possible all the powers of the rational subject and the entire domain of objects we produce, including

⁶ Pheng Cheah, *What is a world? On postcolonial literature as world literature*, Durham N.C.: Duke University Press 2016, p. 36.

the activity of (re)making the world as spatialized objective presence. Second, worldliness is fundamental to literature and even part of its structure. Literature cannot cause or make anything, because its reality is neither spiritual nor material, subjective nor objective. But as the expression of the total meaningfulness of the logos or the setting up of a world, literature uncovers the world and opens up other possible worlds, thereby giving us resolve to respond to modernity's worldlessness and to remake the world according to newly disclosed possibilities (105).

World literature here stretches back in time as across space—just as it did for Auerbach in his famous “Weltliteratur und Philologie” essay. What Cheah is suggesting is that literature creates coherent meanings or “worlds” that do not, however, have a fixed place in any particular society and culture, and *for that reason* they are available for new and unforeseeable “possible worlds.”

Otherwise put: worlded literature is a resource for newness just because, on the one side, it produce ordered imaginative worlds; while, on the other, it is addressed to readerships, global or not, who may have no shared identity or heritage at all. Thus, it, as it were, empties literature out.

What is true of literature is even truer of literary studies: what worlding means for literary studies is (to speak theologically) a *kenosis*, a radical disjunction from cultural embeddedness, from traditions.

Let me finish by coming to this point somewhat differently. Cheah's invocation of a “worlded” literature points not just to spatial globalization but to literature's autonomy: its capacity to constitute a world of its own—one that “cannot cause or make anything” one that is “neither spiritual nor material, subjective nor objective.”

That line of thought is not new: it is a (rather watered down) version of the account of literature given by one of the 20th century's great critics, albeit one outside the Eliotic tradition, namely Maurice Blanchot.⁷

This isn't the place to describe Blanchot's work, it is enough to say that for Blanchot, literature was:

- 1) a space in which anything is possible because nothing is—it can imagine anything because it isn't in the substantive world at all.
- 2) Literature lacks moral, cultural or political value, and for that reason cannot be legitimated by official culture. It is, strictly speaking, *useless*—which is another source of what Blanchot calls its “fascination”.⁸

On one level then, Blanchot is then the theorist who thinks of literature in the way that those who manage or have joined neo-liberal governmentality do: as substanceless, otiose, not fully legitimated, valueless. For him, it is fascinating in its neutrality, its emptiness, its remoteness from the practical world. It is worth reading Blanchot's work, and the canon he constructs from this theorization of the literary, carefully just because of how it resonates with official, *sotte voce* neoliberal attack on literature.

Where does this leave us?

I have argued that Eliotic literary criticism cannot be resuscitated, but I don't think it can be wholly discarded either. It is embedded in what the discipline is, in what English departments, in particular, do. Without some relation to this lineage, English departments become schools or centres: as I say, conglomerates mainly involved in teaching postdisciplines like creative writing, communication skills etc. This is perhaps also to posit that the English department

7

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1982, p. 32 ff.

cannot completely worlded in Cheah's sense: its essential topic is *not* "world literature" but literature as a particular disciplinary lineage has imagined and shaped it.

Indeed (to talk very abstractly) it is also to suggest that what is required of us today is keep two incompatible methods and conceptualizations in play simultaneously —Blanchot's and Leavis's we might say.

Suggesting this, does not of course lead to any guide of practical guide on how to do professional literary criticism today—indeed pretty much all that Blanchot and Leavis/Eliot share is their resistance to the professionalization of literary analysis. But it does indicate that, leaving the practical more or less bureaucratized workings of professional criticism aside, a few projects might now have real intellectual energy and purpose:

1. thinking about the history of modern criticism, particularly Eliotic criticism, more carefully.
2. Engaging in conceptually and historically informed critical discussion about which core European canon has more value and power: Blanchot's (centred on Kafka and Mallarmé....) or Leavis's and the Eliotic critics' (centred on Shakespeare, Donne, Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot, George Eliot...). Here I use the term "core canon" to name canons that are constructed at a distance from (though not completely outside, that would be impossible) of the wills of post-68 emancipation projects.
3. Engaging in conceptually and historically informed critical discussion about non-European canons (or where these do not exist in a critically endorsed way, establishing them) and bringing them into relation to the European canon out of which Eliotic critical institutions were developed. (My view is that, and leaving aside problems concerning translation and translatability, the older "comparativist" methods are in the end more useful than most current "world literature" ones, but that in the current situation we need not to "compare" but to "relate" across traditions and canons.)

4. (re)inventing outsides to academic professionalization from within universities—
collectivities formed more spontaneously, and independently of career-making, by
those under the spell of literature's fascinations ie. by those who find in themselves a
literary subjectivity.