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”a text… that shares my wonder”:

A Survey of Three Contemporary Examples of Creative Criticism

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Abstract

In the last few decades, dissatisfaction with the prevailing critical paradigm – what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as early as 1997 dubbed "paranoid" or "suspicious" reading – has grown significantly. This thesis is a survey of three recent works, *The Albertine Workout* (2014), *Unfinished Business: Notes of A Chronic Re-Reader* (2020), and *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020), that emerge from this discontent. Part of a critical category, to borrow Stephen Benson's and Clare Connor's term, called "Creative Criticism", and partly beholden to the radical roots of feminist literary criticism, these three texts exemplify a turn to affect. Hybrid texts, these works play with genre and voice to reimagine, revitalise, and even liberate literary criticism from the disinterested mood that dictates much of contemporary critical rhetoric. At a time when the function and purpose of literary criticism is yet again being questioned, these texts ask not "What about Power?" but, rather, "What about Love?".

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"I am beginning to realize that taking the self out of our essays is a form of repression. Taking the self out feels like obeying a gag order – pretending an objectivity where there is nothing objective about the experience of confronting and engaging with and swooning over literature."

Kate Zambreno, *Heroines*

"There is too much self in my writing."

Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*

1 Introduction

"Whither criticism?" Here is a simple sentence. It consists of two words: an archaic, interrogative adverb and a common noun. But this sentence embodies a complex history. With varied frequency and fervour, scholars and laymen alike have inquired into the condition of criticism by asking this very question. At the end of the 19th century, Matthew Arnold asked it in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1865). The New Critics asked it again a few decades and a World War later and, finding fault with the narrow rigour of their forebearers, the Poststructuralists asked it *yet* again in the 1960s.

A salient feature of this brief history of revolutions and counterrevolutions in literary criticism is a feeling of disenchantment; a realisation that the *ancien régime* is, in fact, ancient and outmoded. In *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski describes how the same disenchantment has recently resurfaced: "There is a dawning sense among literary and cultural critics that a shape of thought has grown old" (1). Felski does not dismiss criticism as a project or as a discipline. After all, she uses the indeterminate "a" and not the definitive "the". In fact, like her disenchanted forebearers, Felski suggests that the issue lies with criticism in its current guise.

What Felski takes issue with is the type of criticism that has become the *de rigueur*, the "symptomatic" or "diagnostic reading" that has its origins in Poststructuralism (1). In *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017), Joseph North calls it the "contextualist/historicist paradigm" (124). It is a type of reading that approaches the literary work, or any type of cultural text for that matter, with the assumption that "meaning" is "hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter" (Best and Marcus 1). In an emulation of the scientific method, it is also a type of criticism that aspires to

disinterested objectivity. It is a kind of criticism that prefers the application of theory with a capital T. Nowadays, as a shorthand, one might call it Criticism™.

Criticism™ might seem a somewhat whimsical designation. First it was intended as a placeholder for another, more appropriate, word. However, as it stands, Criticism™ is, in fact, an *appropriate* designation. It attempts to articulate how a dominant critical paradigm functions and how it is ratified by both its practitioners and gatekeepers. Moreover, it also articulates how, in many cases, those outside of this paradigm see it. It is only a metaphor. However, it is a metaphor that attempts to describe a complex system of legitimisation and Power in a short and succinct manner. After all, a trademark is used to indicate someone's legal ownership of an intellectual property (*"trademark, n. and adj."*). It is a symbol that signals that this ownership has been legitimised by dominant and powerful institutions, and that this is either the *original* or *representative* version of the thing against which similar versions are considered unauthorised or illegitimate copies (*"trademark, n. and adj."*). The paradigm of Criticism™ rules over much of contemporary Anglo-American literary criticism today and dictates its standard.

This is the reason why the article “Me and My Shadow” (1987), by the American feminist literary critic Jane Tompkins, begins with an apology. The article begins with Tompkins describing how she wavers between two distinct registers. Her task, she maintains, is simple. She is to write a response to a scholar whose views on epistemology she disagrees with. On the one hand, Tompkins acknowledges that what is expected of her is constructive critique presented in a structured and composed manner (169). On the other, secretly Tompkins wishes she could write about the feelings she experienced when she first heard her colleague speak (169). Vacillating between “the voice of the critic”, (169) and her “other voice", (173) Tompkins first provides her readers with an example of a reply written in “the professional sanctioned way” (171). However, she then swerves off track and declares that *actually*:

> The thing I want to say is that I’ve been hiding a part of myself for a long time. I’ve known it was there but I couldn’t listen because there was no place for this person in literary criticism. The criticism I would like to write would always take off from personal experience, would always be in some way a chronicle of my hours and days, would speak in a voice which could talk about everything. (173)

Tompkins is not the only critic that feels stifled by the norms of literary criticism. In fact, Tompkins’ point is iterated in the two quotations that preface this thesis. Indeed, when Anne

Carson prefaces the "Methodology" section of *Economy of the Unlost* (1999) with an apologetic "there is too much self in my writing", (vii) or Kate Zambreno describes the removal of the self from "the essay" as a "gag order", they are gesturing toward a history of "repression" of the self (176). And so, Tompkins feels that even if it is unfamiliar to her, she must "try" to write in a voice that is not the voice of the critic but rather the voice of the self (173).

This thesis is a survey of three contemporary texts, Anne Carson's *The Albertine Workout* (2014), Vivian Gornick's *Unfinished Business: Notes of A Chronic Re-Reader* (2020), and Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020), that grow out of this desire to reimagine the voice of the critic. Genre-defying, hybrid works of critique, these texts are part of an emerging critical *avant-garde* that radically reimagines the look and purpose of contemporary literary criticism. In contrast to the rhetoric standard ratified by Criticism™ these three authors place the personal and/or affective response at the heart of their respective critical endeavour. In this, these texts also stand as manifestos for a turn to affect. It is a turn that, as the both the purpose and value of literary criticism is questioned, answer some of the questions of why one might turn to literary studies in the first place.

The first chapter will cover Carson's *The Albertine Workout*. In *The Albertine Workout*, Carson finds herself indelibly fascinated with Marcel Proust's Albertine, a fascination she shares with Proust's protagonist Marcel. Presented as a series of statements about Albertine, from the perspective of Marcel as well as from a variety of other people, *The Albertine Workout* is a mediation on not only Albertine, but on the criticism about Albertine, and the infinite potential to be something else.

The second chapter will cover Gornick's *Unfinished Business*: *Notes of a Chronic-Reader. Unfinished Business* is the *bildungsroman* of a literary critic. Through the characteristic style that Gornick herself calls "personal journalism", she describes how, at various stages of her life, she returns to the novels that have been significant to her (8). With each new re-read, Gornick's understanding of the literary work shifts. *Unfinished Business* is a case for the radical, transformative potential of re-reading as a critical practice, and how it is always anchored, indissolubly, in the trajectory of one's lived life.

The third chapter will cover Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*. This is a work that refuses to settle. One part memoir, one part translation, one part history, one part literary criticism and one part biography, it is an example of the ways that a work of literature "bleeds into" a life (25). With the assertion "THIS IS A FEMALE TEXT", Ní Ghríofa sets out to

write, on her own terms, not only a history of the life of the neglected Eibhlín Dubh, the author of the *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laogharie*, but the history of herself (3).

Contextualised, these works are also part of a larger trend. Just in in the last decade, Elif Batuman's *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People who Read them* (2010), Joe Moshenska's *Making Darkness Light: A Life of John Milton* (2021), Anahid Nersessian's *Keats's Odes: A Lovers Discourse*, (2021), and Rachel Eisendrath's *Gallery of Clouds* (2021), are just few examples of, to borrow Stephen Benson and Clare Connor's term, "Creative criticism" (5).

This could have been a thesis about *autotheory*, *the personal essay* or the modern *lyrical essay,* each of which are genres that do similar things to works that one might designate as Creative criticism. I have chosen Creative criticism as a kind of leitmotif because it is the term that is most flexible. Defined to some extent by its indefinability, Creative criticism is perhaps best described as innovative and experimental works that take as the basis for critical endeavour the encounter between the critic and the work of art (Benson and Connors 5). In a sense, Creative criticism is a form of reader-response. In her manifesto, "I am for an Art (Writing)" (2018), Susannah Thompson asserts this centrality by arguing that "We [practitioners of Creative criticism] foreground the subjective voice" (27). Often these works are intensely interested in exploring the personal relationship between the literary object and the critic.

These texts are also defined by their irreverence for generic and critical conventions. Measured against the standards of Criticism™ these texts might be formally or linguistically "weird", "make odd, inspired connections", (Benson and Connors 27) "resist some of the hierarchies and taxonomies imposed by academic or disciplinary convention" and attempt to "synthesize" the "creative" and the "critical" (Thompson 25).

Creative criticism is not a new phenomenon. Its origins are perhaps found in Oscar Wilde's *The Critic as an Artist* (1891) where Wilde argues that the critic must be as creative as he is critical (47). However, much of what is *currently* created under this banner is born out of a necessity to "revitalize and reimagine" interpretation (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 10).

Before conducting an analysis of the three texts, this paper will first provide a contextual survey of the state of literary criticism, mostly relegated to the latter half of the 20th century, with forays into the discussion of some of the critical standards that are consistent throughout the history of English as a discipline. However, it will begin with the debate started by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's paper on "Paranoid Reading", one of the initial and most impactful re-examinations of the state of literary criticism at the end of the 20th century.

2 Background

While the "Method Wars" in contemporary literary criticism are often thought to have their beginnings with Rita Felski's provocatively titled *The Limits of Critique* (2015), the fact is that from Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" (1966) to Jon Baskin's "On the Hatred of Literature" (2020), there has long been a feeling that literary criticism has strayed far from its possible potential.[1] As hinted by Sontag's title, there seems to be a problem with *interpretation.* A problem, in other words, with how literary texts are *read* and how people are taught to read them.

In this case reading has a different meaning than simply flipping through a paperback. As Felski states in the introduction to *Uses of Literature*, "reading in literary studies" is a term that "encompass quite disparate activities" (14). In this paper, reading will often be used to describe both the act of reading literature and the act of writing about literature. As Felski explains, in a published work of critique, a reading "constitute a writing, a public performance subject to a host of gate-keeping practices and professional norms" (14). Later, when I argue that Carson, Gornick and Ní Ghríofa read against the conventions of Criticism™, I refer to the different ways that these three authors present their readings in text. Although this is an act that might be presented as such, it is neither spontaneous nor neutral. In fact, this too constitutes a type of performance although what is being performed is best described non-conformity to a prevailing paradigm (14).

First published in 2015, Felski's *The Limits of Critique* charts the development of literary criticism in the 20th century to assess when and where things went wrong.[2] Felski, however, owes a substantial debt to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her seminal essay, "Paranoid Reading, or Reparative Reading, or You're so Paranoid that You Probably Think this Text is About You" (1997). In a sense, *The Limits of Critique* is an expanded version of Sedgwick's relatively brief paper. For Sedgwick literary criticism seemed ill in some undefinable manner and so in "Paranoid Reading" Sedgwick sought to pinpoint the cause of the disease and to offer a remedy.

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[1] For an overview, see e.g., Gutkin, Lee. "We're off to the Method Wars." *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* 22 February 2021, https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/the-review/2021-02-22, Accessed 4 April 2022, and Fuss, Diana. "But What about Love?" *PMLA,* vol. 32, no. 2, 2017, pp. 352 - 355.

[2] *The Limits of Critique* (2015) is the work where Felski provides her most extensive survey of the problems plaguing literary criticism as present. In a sense, it is a distilled version of her critical oeuvre, from *Uses of Literature* (2008) to *Critique and Post-Critique* (2017), to the most recent *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, published at the end of 2020.

According to Sedgwick, what defines criticism in 1997 is what Paul Ricoeur calls "3" or alternatively, as Sedgwick calls it, "paranoid reading" (124). In essence, Ricoeur and Sedgwick are using different terms to describe the tendency to be convinced that the literary text is out to trick the reader, or to lead them astray. It is fitting then, that Sedgwick describes paranoid reading as the "position of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their intellectual offspring" (124). After all, these are theoretical positions that presuppose that the literary object is somehow in league with or beholden to an ideological agenda, hides its allegiances, and is complicit in producing and reproducing repressive structures. This approach necessitates questions such as "Is this text lying to me?", or "What is this text hiding from me?" Frederic Jameson's "Always Historicize!", (qtd. in Sedgwick 125) the first line of *The Political Unconscious* (which has as its telling subtitle *Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*) embodies the spirit of suspicion well. Jameson's statement is intended to encourage the critic to interrogate the situatedness – that is the historical, material, and contextual conditions of its moment of production – of any given work of literature. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that many of the methodological approaches of the various -isms of Poststructuralism, beholden as they are to the historicist/contextualist paradigm that emerges out of it, are predicated on this mode of reading. Over the years, issues with this paradigm have revealed themselves.

As Jane Tompkins argues, the most glaring problem is that Criticism™ has a history of claiming that it "transcends the mere personal", or ideological (169). In agreement with Tompkins, Felski suggests that there is a degree of wilful ignorance at play. Even if the "ideal of disinterestedness" is known to be somewhat unattainable, criticism still maintains a pretence of it by "screen[ing] out any flicker of emotion" and "steer[ing] clear of the first-person voice" (48). But, even if it often goes unacknowledged, the critic, armed with theory with a capital T in hand, often reads with an agenda.

However, as Felski and Anker argue in the introduction to *Critique and Post-Critique* (2017), there is no denying that a lot of radical and important work has been done under the banner of paranoid reading (6). To read between and underneath the lines of literary and cultural texts to unearth secret histories, recover hidden ones, and to expose ideological and cultural biases has been the primary work of literary criticism since the 1960s. To this practice we owe some of the most resonant Poststructural works of critique. It is difficult now to imagine how the study of the 19th century novel would look without Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), or how our understanding of the literature of the 16th century would look without Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980). Modern theories of

gender are largely shaped by arguments made in Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), and where would we be without Foucault's writings on Power?

The most salient problem for Sedgwick, as it will later be for Felski, is not paranoid reading in and of itself. There is of course, in Sedgwick, a sense that what was once radical theory has become normative practice and that its "real force" has been "blunted" through "habitual practices" (124). For Sedgwick, the problem lies more in the fact that suspicious reading has become the *de facto* mode of reading (126). In other words, that it has become Criticism™.

In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski maintains that what I have chosen to call Criticism™, and that she calls the "mood" of "professional suspicion", (20 - 22) is defined by three telling adjectives: "detached, dispassionate, and sceptical" (46). Embodied in these three adjectives are the most often cited problems of Criticism™.

In "On the Hatred of Literature" (2020), Jon Baskin describes how this stance has come to be synonymous with a contempt for the affective power of literature. Baskin describes a resonant scene from his university days:

> our teachers having delivered a lecture on New Historicism as the culminating achievement of twentieth-century literary criticism—a student stood up in the back of the room. Nearly giving way to what seemed to me at the time (but not now) an embarrassing overflow of emotion, she accused the professors of "hating" literature. We had become English majors in the first place, she went on, not because novels and poems told us interesting things about history or politics but because they made us feel less alone, captivated us with their beauty, helped us to better know ourselves and the world.

The outburst of Baskin's classmate echoes Sontag, who half a century ago argued that "interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art" (7). For Sontag, as for Baskin's classmate, it is the experience and not the analysis that should be prioritised. However, under the contextualist/historicist paradigm, a paradigm beholden to and repeating "detached", "dispassionate" and "disinterested" as an adage, Baskin's classmate is what is considered a bad, or uncritical reader.

In Michael Warner's "Uncritical Reading" (2004), a survey of the way that literary criticism is taught in modern English departments, he writes: "Don't read like Quixote, like Emma Bovary, like Ginny Weasley" (14). But why are these examples of bad readers? It is because they read exactly as Baskin's classmate does. The way Baskin's professor tells her she will "learn" not to (Baskin). Don Quixote is perhaps *the* quintessential example of a bad reader. Drunk on delusions derived from chivalric romances, Quixote is so close to the books

he reads that he is unable to distinguish fiction from fact. So too, for Emma Bovary, who loses herself in romantic novels and the society pages of the Paris newspapers when her own reality proves dissatisfactory, while failing to realise that her reality feels dissatisfactory because of her desire to live like they do in the books and papers that she reads. Ginny Weasley, seduced and drawn into Tom Riddle's diary in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), is a more modern example and a testimony to the longevity of this trope.

These are but three examples of famous cautionary tales about what might happen when appropriate distance to the literary work is not kept: of the dire consequences of letting identification and attachment cloud sober judgement. Perhaps it is just a coincidence that two out of three of these bad readers are women. But then again, maybe it is not.

Historically, women have been accused of being bad, or even outright uncritical readers precisely because they have been the group associated with affective or absorbing reading (Zambreno 21 - 22; Tompkins 178). To avoid the essentialist conundrum Tompkins makes the point that women in Western culture are socialised into being "the bearers of emotion", and therefore might be more inclined to turn to forms of reading and writing that correspond to the way that they have been socialised (170).

While it is somewhat unjust to reduce the Western History of Epistemology to a binary it is not untrue to point out that reason rather than emotion has held the privileged position in the production of knowledge, increasingly so since the Enlightenment. In fact, Poovey argues that "the ideal of critical objectivity" is "enshrined in nearly every model of literary criticism formulated before the last third of this century" (113). Because of this, Thompkins argues that the very structure of Western epistemology is organised in such a way that what is culturally coded as female, or feminine forms of writing, the category where criticism that originates in the affective and/or personal is usually relegated to, is often dismissed as either bad or uncritical (170). Zambreno, quoting T.S. Eliot who '"distrust[s] the Feminine in writing"' because it contains an unrestrained abundance of emotion, is emblematic of how affective responses to literature have been viewed with suspicion in the history of criticism (21).

However, the problem is not that this type of reading is bad in and of itself, but that it has been *constructed* as such. In fact, as Baskin's student, Sontag, and Tompkins point out, this type of reading lies at the heart of why they feel drawn to literary studies in the first place. At present, its dismissal has much to do with Criticism™'s dubious claims to a methodological seriousness that historically has set the sciences apart from the humanities. As literary criticism attempted to professionalise, it appropriated the manner of scientific rigour and dismissed the affective stance as unprofessional. Once the hallmark of New Criticism and

proponed by, for example, Wimsatt and Beardsley in *The Affective Fallacy* (1959), the "anti-affective stance", (Freund 49) and the "suppression of the Reading Subject" still subsists as an ideal in contemporary literary criticism (Freund 58).

The perceived problems in Criticism™, at present, are multifaceted. Some have longer histories. Some are modern, even contemporary. From various corners new critical practices have emerged as a response.

In a recent episode of the literary and cultural podcast *The American Vandal,* literary scholars Merve Emre and Anna Kornbluh consider what lies behind the renaissance of the personal idiom in contemporary literary criticism. The word renaissance is not used in the podcast, but it is appropriate because what is described is a revival of a phenomenon rather than a new one. Formerly relegated to the margins of literary criticism the "idiom of self-disclosure" has emerged as "the organising frame for a number of different genres" (06.56.00 - 07.03.00). From the mid-century rise of confessional writing to a virtual dominance of it in the last decade or so (11.14.00 - 11.16.00), Emre remarks that nowadays it is the norm rather than the exception that literary reviews start with a personal anecdote that they do not quite manage to move away from (15.35.00 - 15.43.00). While Kornbluh identifies the personal idiom as a way to fill a vacuum in order to compensate for a lack of "training" that underpins informed readings of texts Emre suggest that it is often positioned as a mode of resistance to an "industry logic" about how literary texts should be understood (12.45.00 - 14.37.00).

While the personal idiom, and/or the affective angle, is a relatively new phenomenon in mainstream criticism, it has older roots. In the 60s Sontag saw, as a viable option to interpretation, to "see more" and "feel more" (14). In "Paranoid Reading", Sedgwick suggests as an alternative to "hermeneutics of suspicion" what she calls "reparative reading": even if one disagrees with a text, or finds it contentious or uncomfortable, one should attempt to approach it with "love" rather than distrust (128).

> The vocabulary for articulating any reader's reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it's no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintance with such motives… No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival… the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. (150)

Following Sedgwick, Felski describes how she recently overhauled a class in literary theory that she had been teaching for decades. While the first half of the course takes a conventional path through the history of criticism, the latter half focuses on "empathy and sympathy,

recognition and identification, enchantment and absorption… as they shape how and why people read" (180). At the centre of all these alternative ways of reading is not only a return to an "I", but to an explicitly feeling "I".

This thesis opened with a two-word question: "Whither criticism?" It is a question asked by Carson, Gornick and Ní Ghríofa in the three texts at the heart of this thesis. These texts transform the practice of criticism in different ways. They are intimate and personal, imaginative, and affective. In this manner, these texts stand as viable alternatives to the problems afflicting literary criticism at present.

To do this, the three texts in this thesis also respond and interact with traditions of feminist critical practice, both explicitly and implicitly. Creative criticism is not exclusively relegated to the domain of feminist writing. Because of its flexibility and openness, for example, queer and postcolonial writers have also acknowledged its potential. However, as will be illustrated, its practices have significant overlap with feminist critical practice. As Felski argues, "Feminists were among the first critics to emphasize the affective dimensions of interpretation, to talk about reading as an embodied practice, to conceive of literature as a means of creative self-fashioning" (29). Elaine Showalter maintains that "While scientific criticism struggled to purge itself of the subjective, feminist criticism reasserted the authority of experience" (181). This is another thread that links Carson, Gornick and Ní Ghríofa. These texts pull on these earlier threads, but alongside contemporary movements in critique, they weave them together into something new.

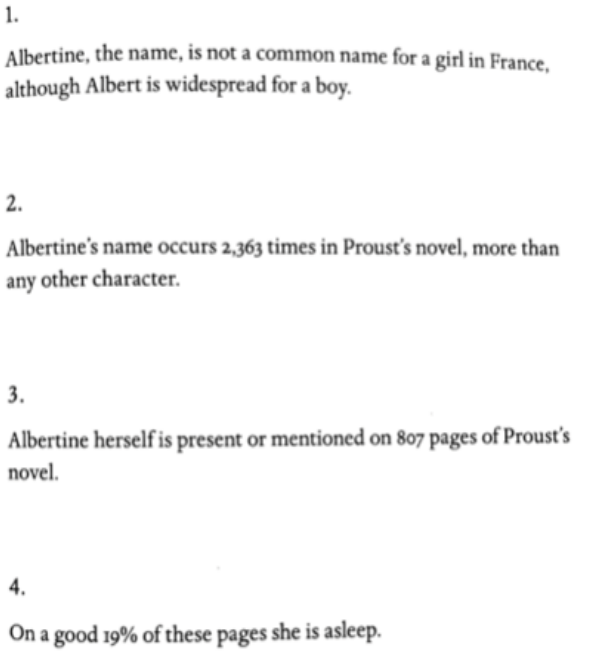
3 Working Out: Anne Carson's *The Albertine Workout* (2014)

3.1 Why Albertine?

The Albertine Workout (2014) is the Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson's prose work about Albertine, the love-interest of Marcel in Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. A curious work, it is one of Carson's less well-known texts. It is written as a series of 59 short, snapshot-esque entries. Added to the printed edition is a series of inconsistently numbered and esoteric appendices. Their relevance to the main text emerges gradually, as sometimes they are only tangentially related to Albertine.

Here is what Carson says about the origins of *The Albertine Workout*, as she introduces a reading of it at the Center for Fiction on September 13, 2013 (00.25.00 - 02.07.00). In 2003, she decided to read Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. She read it every morning for seven years, as she ate breakfast. She considers it to be some of the best seven

years of her life. After finishing it, Carson found herself in the "grey tedium of life after Proust" (01.39.00 - 01.43.00). And so, bereft, Carson revisits Proust. First by consuming texts about Proust: biographies, scholarly monographs, papers, and critique. Then, to prolong the experience Carson decides to do her own research, as it happens, about a character called Albertine. *The Albertine Workout* is the result of that work.



1.

Albertine, the name, is not a common name for a girl in France, although Albert is widespread for a boy.

2.

Albertine's name occurs 2,363 times in Proust's novel, more than any other character.

3.

Albertine herself is present or mentioned on 807 pages of Proust's novel.

4.

On a good 19% of these pages she is asleep.

Fig. 1. Anne, Carson. *The Albertine Workout*. New Directions Publishing: New York, 2014, p. 5.

Carson's title, *The Albertine Workout,* can be read in a couple of different ways. Workout is often synonymous with exercise. Definitions vary but amount in various ways to "a task prescribed or performed to attain proficiency" ("*workout. n.*"). An exercise is a close cousin to the essay. Essay, in the Montaigne tradition, means to "try" out or to sketch (Benson and Connors 6 - 9). Carson's text is not much like an essay in either style or appearance but, as per her title, her conceit agrees with the spirit of it (fig. 1).

But "workout" has other meanings as well. Adam Watt in "Poetry as Creative Critique", one of the few critical texts written about *The Albertine Workout*, reads workout as synonymous with physical exercise; 80s aerobics and self-help, to be exact (649). For Watt *The Albertine Workout* is an example of a "self-improving exercise" (649 - 50). But there is not much sense of this in Carson's writing. Workout, considering the brief paratextual context that Carson provides before the public reading of the text, is more about exhausting an obsession; it is not so much "self-help" as it is an exorcism. What Watt is right about however, is that *The Albertine Workout* is not only about Carson working out her own response to Proust but also about working out the character of Albertine (650).

The story is this, then: Carson, reading Proust; eating, working out Proust's – or is it Marcel's? – Albertine. Simultaneously, alongside other responses to Albertine, she works out her own.

First, Carson begins *The Workout* with what others have said about Albertine. Here, in sequence, entry no. 6 and no. 7:

> Albertine constitutes a romantic, psychosexual, and moral obsession for the narrator of the novel mainly through volume 5 of Proust's 7-volume (in the Pléiade edition) work. (6)

> Volume 5 is called La Prisonniére in French … it was declared by Roger Shattuck, a world expert on Proust … to be the one volume of the novel that a time-pressed reader may safely and entirely skip. (6)

It is telling that Carson decides to include the latter statement. *The Albertine Workout* seems to be born out of a desire to prove that, in fact, Albertine is not inconsequential. Heedless of the recommendation by an "award-winning" expert on Proust that it would detract nothing from the overall work to skip the volumes where Albertine features most heavily, Carson responds by writing an entire text about her.

To build her case Carson first provides some indisputable facts. In the second entry of *The Workout*, Carson states that "Albertine's name occurs 2,363 times in Proust's novel, more than any other character" (5). Moreover, Albertine is either mentioned or featured on 807 pages of the text (5). Based on these facts Albertine seems anything but omissible. But it is not only the frequency of Albertine's appearance (both in flesh and in spirit) that seem to be Carson's underlying motivation in composing *The Workout*. Why Albertine?

Carson's motive is somewhat opaque. But by considering examples from Carson's oeuvre, we see that there is a common register across many of her more critically oriented texts. For example, "Ordinary Time: Virginia Woolf and Thucydides on War" begins, "I like the way Thucydides…" (3). This "like" as a starting point for critical inquiry is a characteristic of Carson. From her brief introduction before her reading, it is evident *The Workout* is a deeply personal act of criticism. Recall, for a moment, Carson's almost obsessive desire to remain a little longer in Proust's world, and her earlier confession that there is too much of herself in her work.

3.2 Misunderstanding *The Albertine Workout*

However, there is another equally viable answer to the question, "Why Albertine?" that emerges as *The Albertine Workout* is more closely attended to.

In a review for the *Boston Review*, the author Benjamin Landry reviews Carson's text. While praising Carson's chameleonic qualities as an author/critic/poet, there is nevertheless a sense that Landry is rather unsatisfied with *The Albertine Workout* as a piece of criticism. It

has, as Landry writes in the opening paragraph, “the loose feel of an undergraduate exercise” (Landry). It could be understood, he suggests, as “an imitation of a response to a 200-level literature course assignment: Chart the development of a secondary character in a volume of your choosing of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*” (Landry). It is not untrue to say that Landry reads *The Albertine Workout* as juvenile, a work of the Untrained. Neither “undergraduate” nor “200-level literature course assignment” are in the context of the piece compliments. Perhaps Landy has taken the etymological implications of workout too much to heart. After all, the review concludes with the remark that it seems more “like a warm-up” than a real exercise (Landry).

Landry’s main problem with *The Workout* can be summarised by the following sentence:” Crucially, we might wonder whether or not Carson’s reading necessarily furthers our understanding of Albertine, rather than creates a character that is more Carson’s invention than Proust’s” (Landry). For Landry, this is something negative; a failure by the critic to rise to her task. Arguably, Landry misunderstands the motivation behind *The Workout*.

First, Landry supposes that the aim of Carson’s critical exercise is to “teach” or reach some conclusion about Albertine. Carson categorically refuses this. She considers Albertine from various angles but refuses to settle on a definite reading. Others, she makes clear, have *understood* Albertine. Marcel, various critics, and scholars all have tried to impose their readings on this enigmatic woman, but Carson is not among them. There is no thesis proven or disproven about Albertine in *The Workout*, only a series of statements. For example, Carson suggests that Albertine might be based on Alfred Agostinelli, a real-life acquaintance of Proust (6). Carson admits that for a variety of reasons this is a tantalising reading. She even returns to it in the appendices. But she also asserts that biographical readings are notoriously unreliable, and that there is no way to know for certain the relation the fictional Albertine has to the real-life Agnostinelli (19).

Landry’s second problem is that he thinks Carson has veered too far from her source material and that in her reading she has transformed Proust’s Albertine into someone else. To remedy this, Landry goes back to Proust in order to offer his own understanding. As Landry puts it, to “extrapolate beyond Carson’s reading” (Landry). Brief as it is, Landry’s review is emblematic of an attitude. There is no doubt that Landy considers *The Albertine Workout* to be elegant, but it is an elegant failure. It fails to do what Landry has come to expect from Criticism™.

Landry expects Carson to be beholden to Proust. To move beyond it, as Carson does, is to breach an unspoken decorum. Partly, Landry’s uneasiness originates in the fact that Carson

refuses to differentiate between criticism and invention. It seems however, that Landry misses the fact that this is the point of *The Workout*. Carson has, as it is strongly implied, discovered a problem with how Albertine has been read previously. This necessitates a degree of invention (or speculation). In fact, there is a pervasive sense in *The Albertine Workout* that Marcel does not *get* or wittingly or unwittingly misunderstands Albertine. This is what Carson writes. Consider,

> The problems of Albertine are, (from the narrator's point of view)
> a) Lying
> b) Lesbianism
> And (from Albertine's point of view).
> c) Being imprisoned in the narrator's house (6)

This is a summary of Carson's summary of Marcel's understanding of Albertine set out in entry 8 - 29. Albertine constitutes a persistent mystery for Marcel. She is almost certainly a lesbian, but continuously denies to Marcel that she is, despite his repeated inquiries into the matter (11). Albertine is a liar (a bad one too). Albertine both repels and fascinates Marcel (11). At first, Marcel is unable to distinguish Albertine from her friends (7 - 8). Marcel is drawn to Albertine's freedom. However, trapped in his house, Albertine's domesticity bores him (8). Marcel sometimes possesses Albertine in her sleep (11). He believes he is the master of these moments (11). But perhaps he is not. Who is to say? (11)

Within this is a hint of what motivates Carson to compose *The Workout*. In "Poetry as Creative Critique" Watt rightly identifies that, "Albertine represents a sort of resistance to standard modes of analysis. She certainly represents a resistance to interpretation for the narrator" (655). What appeals then, is Albertine's elusiveness, and an elusive character perhaps requires an elusive response. To Marcel, Carson argues, Albertine is "unknowable" (14). Albertine lacks a stable, solid identity, and is "ten different Albertines in succession" (14). Carson's Albertine is similarly difficult to pin down. Considering this, it is interesting that Landry feels the need to correct Carson's reading of Albertine when it is clear that Carson is interested in the enigmatic quality of Albertine, and not necessarily in pinning her down. *The Workout* is unified by what Carson seems to find most intriguing about Albertine: her lesbianism, her apparent relation to a real-life object of desire of Proust; Marcel's possession of her and the way that any sense of Albertine as an individual disappears in it. Rather than providing an *explanation* of Albertine Carson offers her readers an *exploration*. An exploration of Albertine beyond Marcel, beyond Proust and even beyond

other critical readings. Nevertheless, what is interesting is that Carson does not discount any of these other considerations of Albertine but rather shows them as potential or possible readings, but also that they are readings among a myriad of other readings. For Carson, criticism is not a revealing act.

In fact, exploration as a motivating factor of *The Workout* is clear from the way in which she sometimes addresses her readers. In entry no, 29, Carson draws parallels between Albertine and Shakespeare's Ophelia. Carson notes, "at this point, parenthetically, if we had time, several observations could be made about the similarities between Albertine and Ophelia" (11). Carson then proceeds to list several possible beginnings of elaborate arguments. One of these is the similarity between Shakespeare's and Proust's use of the sexual language of plants to describe female desire. But then she cuts herself short as, seemingly, there is no time.

A significant part of the work of *The Albertine Workout* is to enable Albertine to be read in new ways. A testimony of the effectiveness of this invitation is found in Watt's "Poetry as Creative Critique" where, prompted by Carson's suggestion of the Ophelia/Albertine plant parallel, he performs such a reading (Watt 652 – 3). Furthermore, consider "Appendix 15 (b) on adjectives", where Carson begins an exploration of Roland Barthes' desire to craft a language without adjectives (26). Carson notes that, "clearly these are waters too deep for a mere appendix to attempt", however she encourages the reader in their "private inquiry" to explore the matter further (26). Carson's work is not a rejection of critique, but it is perhaps a rejection of the kind of critique that refuses to be open to invention and speculation.

Rigorous scholarship underpins Carson's text. However, it is scholarship that is only briefly alluded to, a passing gesture to other texts and other readings. There is a sense too, that beneath the snapshots or brief glimpses of insight that Carson gives the reader about the relationship between Marcel and Albertine, there is an entire history of a life lived between two people. In this sense too, *The Workout* is a statement about the future potential of critique.

Carson's Albertine is not Marcel's Albertine. In turn, Marcel's Albertine seems different from Proust's Albertine and Landry's reading of Albertine is not similar to Watts'. But simultaneously, Carson seems to say that Albertine is all these people. That to each person, fictional and real, Albertine reveals herself differently. Albertine thus, also becomes an excellent example of how the critic shapes critique. Here perhaps, another answer to the question, "why Albertine?"

3.3 Unscholarly? the Appendices

The Albertine Workout was first published in the *London Review of Books* in 2014, without appendices. The printed version, published later the same year, includes a number of them. These appendices are unevenly and inconsistently numbered. Why include these? At a glance, it seems a paratext one would expect in a more traditionally organised work of critique such as a monograph. The spirit of them can best be understood by the closing sentence to "appendix 15 (a) on adjectives": "I can see very little value in this kind of information but making such a list is some of the best fun you'll have once you enter the desert of After-Proust" (25). Here, again, Carson returns to her bereavement. Her writing professes no practical or scholarly value. In fact, it is perhaps the opposite of the "narrow utilitarianism" that Mary Poovey sees as characterising much of institutional critical endeavour (109). Rather, Carson's work is born out of a personal desire to spend a little more time with Proust, after Proust.

Although it is present in the earlier part of the text, the informal and eclectic appendices are where Carson's subversive critical voice comes to the forefront. In *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* (1997), Geoff Dyer wishes for a type of criticism that "spare[s] [him] the drudgery of systematic examination" and which gives him "the lighting flashes" found in "those wild books in which there is no attempt to cover the ground thoroughly or reasonably" (103). Carson's whole work, but especially the appendices, embody these "lightning flashes". They range from Carson finally deciding to (unsuccessfully) define the difference between metaphor and metonym, (34) a digression on nuns and Hitchcock, (30) an entry on Samuel Beckett where Carson reflects that unlike Proust, Beckett seems "more interested in the posterior of the body" (23). Once Carson admits in a particular nonsensical appendix that "this one got away on me" (32). In "appendix 33 (b) on metaphor and metonym" Carson writes about an "exemplarily small cabin that may or may not have burned down" (34):

> And although I couldn't remember its context, had neglected to record its provenance, and didn't really grasp its relevance for metaphor and metonym, the small cabin called out to me not to forsake it. It remains a very good example, we just don't know of what. (34)

There is no apparent logical point to these, except that one might assume that Carson saw a connection or a parallel which she found interesting and noted down. This is not to say that there is not a semblance of unity in Carson's appendices. The last appendix elegantly ties the

threats of some of the preceding ones together (38). Moreover, several of the appendixes, such as the appendix 17 and 19 where Carson muses on the relationship between Albertine and speed, and how this connects to the elusiveness of her character, elaborate on issues raised in the first half of *The Workout* (27 - 28). However, a number of the appendices are very much written in the spirit of working out, related to its draft-like etymological implications; a series of thoughts bound loosely together in a type of semi-parodic academic stream-of-consciousness. The final line of appendix 33 (b) is a good example of this diffuse, almost half-thought/half-abandoned quality.

The appendices close on an entry about a "bad photograph "of Proust and Alfred Agostinelli in a car (38). "You cannot help but wonder …" writes Carson about "the posture of Alfred Agostinelli's head" which is thrown back as if the car is in motion while it is standing still (38). Carson also wonders what they might have talked about, sitting there in a car that is not in motion. It is this wonder that permeates *The Albertine Workout*. As a verb, which is the way Carson uses it above, "wonder" means to think of something or ask a question. This verb is the leitmotif of Carson's text. But "wonder" can also be a noun. Wonder, of course, is the feeling of surprise and/or awe one feel when faced with something beautiful or distinct. Implicitly, this too is a guiding force of Carson's critique.

The Albertine Workout is representative of a turn in criticism. A turn that Felski identifies as asking not "What about Power" but rather, "What about Love", or "Where is your Theory of Attachment" (18). In an interview for *The Paris Review* Carson maintains that while she was taught that "objective reportage of academic questions is the ideal form of scholarship" it has always been a register which she has found immensely difficult to stick to (Aitken). Rather, Carson describes her scholarship as "intensely subjective" (Aitken). For Carson, this is enough to justify a somewhat nonsensical section about a cabin who calls out to her begging not to be forsaken.

Elaine Showalter writes in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981), that one of feminist criticism's main caveats with Poststructuralism and the other various -isms of the 1970s and onwards that it was "arid and falsely objective" (181). Showalter, citing Judith Fetterly's *the Resisting Reader*, argues that feminist criticism is, to some extent, characterised by a "'resistance to codification'" and "'a refusal to have its parameters set'" (qtd. in Showalter 181). While it can certainly be said that feminist criticism under Criticism™ has strayed somewhat from its roots, being codified along with other radical practices, its origins are in non-conformity. It is interesting to consider Carson's critical examination of Albertine in light of this since it seems that both the form and content of her text is resistant to the type

of logic and order, and conclusions expected in Criticism™. It is rather in the spirit of "art (writing) that is partial" and "passionate" (Thompson 29). *The Albertine Workout* is a work born out of its writer's intense interest in Albertine, and everything that has a tangential relationship to Albertine. Undoubtedly, it is a work that embodies the creative potential of criticism and has affinity with both earlier and new forms of subversive criticism. It utilises the non-conformity allowed by these forms of criticism to, in 59 brief entries and a series of uneven appendixes, unfold and explore Albertine's potential. It is an elusive text about an elusive character.

4 "Personal Journalism": Vivian Gornick's *Unfinished Business: Notes of A Chronic Re-Reader* (2020)

4.1 "Personal Journalism"

In the subtitle *to Unfinished Business*, the volume of loosely connected essays that chronicles her re-reading of works by authors such as D. H. Lawrence, Elisabeth Bowen, Doris Lessing, Colette and others, the American writer and feminist critic Vivian Gornick titles herself a "chronic re-reader" (cover). "Born reading", Gornick has throughout her life made a habit of returning to books that she has connected with (3). For Gornick, reading literature is life-affirming. From "earliest childhood", it has provided Gornick with "courage for life" (4). The first essay, an introduction to the volume as well as to Gornick's reading life, ends with a programmatic statement that the purpose of her work is to "put my readers behind my eyes, experience the subject as I have experienced it, feel it viscerally as I have" (15). In *Unfinished Business* Gornick invites her reader to share in her reading experience: to feel as she felt and experience it as she experienced it. In this way, Gornick does not assert a disinterested distance, but locates her reading firmly in the affective dimension.

Unfinished Business is an example of reader-response at work. Among its many contributions to the field of literary criticism, reader-response locates the production of knowledge not in the text itself but in the interaction between reader and text. In "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism", Jane Tompkins argues that in reader-response criticism "the goal … becomes the faithful description of the activity of reading, an activity that is minute, complicated, strenuous, and never the same from one reading to the next" (xvii). The leitmotif of Gornick's exegesis bears similarities to Tompkins statement that reader-response does the work of "removing the literary texts from the centre of critical attention and replacing it with the reader's cognitive activity" (xvii). After all, Gornick states

about her practice of reading that, “It was I, as a reader, who had to journey towards the richest meaning of the book” (19). *Unfinished Business* is this journey chronicled.

Reader-response is one way of describing Gornick’s reading. It helps contextualise it and orient it on a critical axis. But the term Gornick herself uses is “personal journalism” (8). “Personal journalism” describes both her style and the way that she positions herself in relation to the literary work.

Through her oeuvre, Gornick consistently affects a close, often autobiographic, tone. It is visible in *The End of the Novel of Love* (1997), Gornick’s critical exegesis of the death of a certain type of narrative of Love, as she continuously describes how her personal experiences have influenced her critical understanding. It is most visible in the last chapter, titled “the End of the Novel of Love”, which begins, “When I was a girl the whole world believed in love” (153). In *the Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (2002), Gornick asserts the compelling power of the “emotional experience which preoccupies the writer” as a rhetoric strategy (7). In *Unfinished Business*, she relates the origins of this realisation.

One night in the late 1960s, Gornick returns home from a “speakout” and tasked with writing down her thoughts about it, she struggles with how she should frame it (6). She realises that to “include herself as a participating narrator” might be the way to develop her “natural style” (14). Gornick’s “Personal journalism” combines a reportage-like style with a degree of intimacy. It is “part personal essay, part social criticism”, as she states in *The Situation and the Story* (9). This is the style she employs in order for her readers to “come away moved and instructed by the poignancy not of Art and Politics but of Life and Politics” (*Unfinished Business* 8). “Art”, in this context, is not separate from “Life”, but instead Gornick seems to say it is an indissoluble part of it. Here is an example of how “personal journalism” looks enacted.

As a child Gornick read for “the transporting pleasure” of reading (5). However, as a young adult, she discovered that literature did not only offer escapism but acted as a mirror of her own experience. For Gornick, literature became a way of understanding “what I was living through and what I was to make of it” (5). One example is the episode re-telling how Gornick falls in and out of love with second-wave feminism, and how this influences her reading of a variety of literary works.

This is how Gornick tells it: as a budding journalist she is tasked with reporting on a rally attended by important names in second-wave feminism, such as Kate Millet, Susan Brownmiller, Shulamith Firestone and Ti-Grace Atkinson (10). Finding herself infatuated and intrigued, it is a moment that comes to have a significant influence on the trajectory of

Gornick's life, and on her reading. For the first time she has acquired "the tools of analysis" (11). With "exhilaration" she describes how, armed with new ideas, she is able to look with new understanding on beloved texts (11): "Taking up many of the books I'd grown up with, I saw for the first time that most of the female characters in them were stick figures devoid of flesh and blood" (11). With an arched look back at her younger self, Gornick describes how, in wake of this discovery that reconfigures her understanding of the structure of the world and her place in it, she becomes a "joyous anarchist" (11).

There is no doubt that Gornick is a child of the movement that birthed suspicious reading, entangled as she is in its discourse. In brief, broad strokes Gornick describes how her involvement in the community and ideology of Second-wave feminism coloured several decades of her life, as it did for many of her contemporaries (12 - 13). However, toward the end of her essay, Gornick describes a reconsideration of the readings done by her impassioned younger self. As the euphoric years of the 1970s feminist movement start giving way and cracks begin to appear, she writes that "the contradictions in my own character rose to plague me" (13). No longer convinced that it is the feminist issues that lie at the heart of many of the novels that she previously considered to have it as their central theme it is, she discovers, the "perniciousness of the human self-divide" that stands out as a central theme (14). As a result, Gornick "once again" finds herself "reading differently" (14).

To Gornick, literature is a mirror. Here, Gornick shares similarities with Baskin's student, who suggests that identification, and recognition are some of the reasons why one might turn to literature. Gornick's "personal journalism" is a type of reader-response, but it is reader-response after her own fashion. Gornick reads, and importantly *re-reads* literature with an autobiographic slant; this is both the origin and the centre of her critical work.

4.2 A Critical Bildungsroman

One productive way of understanding *Unfinished Business* is to read it as what might best be described as critical *bildung.* Here, I borrow the concept of *Bildungsroman*, but apply it to what is more appropriately described as literary criticism. In its most basic terms, a *Bildungsroman* is a novel in which the spiritual education or formative years of the main character are set out. Some examples of the most famous of the genre are Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795 - 6), Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1849), and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853). These are Romantic and Victorian novels, but even if the genre has fallen somewhat out of fashion it has nevertheless also found many expressions in the Modern and contemporary novel as well.

Why, then, critical *bildung*? Why the parallels between what is famously a conservative genre and innovative criticism? The key is *how* Gornick chronicles her spiritual and social formation. In the sixth essay of *Unfinished Business,* Gornick writes about her debt to the writer Natalia Ginzburg. Recounting struggles which she had early in her career as a writer, Gornick relates how Ginzburg's essay" My Vocation", greatly influences her own understanding of her development as a writer. Gornick describes this essay as a "miniature *bildungsroman"* (104). It is a story of how the "author is teaching herself how to grow up and take her place in the world as a human being who is a writer" (104). The same could be said for *Unfinished Business*.

Consider, for example, Gornick's re-reading of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913). She describes her first encounter with the novel as electrifying (17). Over the next fifteen years, Gornick reads it three times and each time she re-reads it she finds herself identifying with a different character. First it is Miriam, (17) but "the next time [she] read the book [she] was Clara" (18). On the third re-read, Gornick finds herself sympathising with Lawrence's protagonist, Paul. Gornick, now in her mid-thirties, "twice married, twice divorced" and "newly "liberated," sees herself as Paul does at the end of the novel, as the "hero of her own life" (18). These, and her most recent re-readings, are chronicled in *Unfinished Business*. On this re-read, she discovers not only that she misremembers a lot of the novel, but that even the "overriding theme" of the novel that she previously had identified as "sexual passion as *the* central experience of life", reveals itself to be demonstrably false (18). Rather, Lawrence, she argues, uses "erotic love as a metaphor", (21) and the central conceit of the novel is Lawrence depicting the struggle between "Paul and the illusion of sexual love as liberation" (21). Gornick's initial readings correspond to her own experiences as a young woman, and her understanding is coloured by the culture she was brought up in. She writes: "When I was a girl in the 1950s, culture was still joined at the hip to those restraints of bourgeois life that kept erotic experience at distance. This distance fed a dream of transcendence linked to a promise of self-discovery interwoven with the force of sexual passion" (21). "Love" as they called it, she maintains, was believed to transform "existence" (22), and through literature, from *Anna Karenina,* and *The Age of Innocence* to *Madame Bovary* to "middlebrow" and "dimestore novels" (22), culture perpetuated this idea that "to know oneself through one's senses was to arrive at the heart of human existence" (21). However, now older, she discovers that rather than liberated, the characters in Lawrence's novel are "deeply embittered" by this promise (22 - 23).

Gornick's reading mirrors her own social formation. It grows up and changes with her revaluation of her social and cultural circumstances. From confessing that she first believed that Miriam's purpose in the novel was "to thwart the male protagonist" to "the possibility that Miriam was labouring under to same blindsided narrowness that hinders Paul and Mrs. Morel (32), here, as elsewhere, it is clear that *Unfinished Business* is not a classic *bildungsroman* in critical guise. While embodying crucial traits of the genre, it nevertheless plays with the expectations of the narrative framework of the traditional *bildungsroman*.

When one thinks of the "central ideas" of the classic *bildung,* it is "the self-realisation of the individual and the individual's socialisation into society", and that these two things are "one and the same" that come to mind (Joannou 200). So, David Copperfield, at his desk surrounded by children and wife – comfortably bourgeoisie – writing his memoirs, and Jane Eyre declaring "Reader, I married him", marks the completion of their respective *bildung* (Dickens 878 - 882; Bronte 517). However, as the title *Unfinished Business* suggests – inherent in re-reading as a critical endeavour – is the idea that neither one's spiritual formation nor social education is ever truly finished.

In fact, Gornick's critical *bildung* is more like a more modern expression of the genre. Maroula Joannou, who charts the distinctive traits of what she calls the "female *bildungsroman*" by studying some of the most well-known examples of the 20th century, argues that many of the woman-centric ones question the "central ideas" of the classic *bildungsroman* (200). Joannou argues that "a woman's quest for her identity may be explorative rather than goal-oriented, epistemological rather than teleological, relational rather than linear, circuitous or circular rather than direct, or shifting rather than fixed" (203). Gornick illustrates the exact same phenomena in her critical re-considerations of texts which she has, in different ways, found compelling and influential throughout her life. What Gornick describes is an ambivalent, shifting relationship to literature understanding: a "coming-of-age" narrative, with no definite or finite end or reconciliation. In this sense, what seems on the surface to be a deceptively simple collection of essays of a woman reading, and re-reading, nevertheless reveals itself as a complex and distinctly innovative form of criticism. Blending memoir, *bildungsroman*, and criticism, Gornick uses "personal journalism" to write her own, and unconventional, critical *bildung*.

4.3 Re-reading as Critical Reorientation

One argument made very clearly in Gornick's text is that reading, to some extent, is determined by one's individual situation and understanding. At the beginning of her sharp and

insightful essay on how reading Pat Baker's *Regeneration* (1991) led her to re-read J.L. Carr's a *Month in the Country* (1980) and emerging from this re-reading with a completely new understanding of the latter text, Gornick recalls an article that she read some years ago. In that article, a well-known critic expresses regret about a novel she completely trashed in a review. Upon re-reading, the critic has realised that the novel she initially eviscerated maybe wasn't too bad after all. "Ah, receptivity!", Gornick remarks, "Otherwise known as readiness. Responsible for every successful connection ever made between a book and a reader" (117). Gornick's revised understanding of *A Month in the Country* is predicated on re-reading it with Baker's *Regeneration*: "It was Billy Prior who sent me back to *A Month in the Country,* looking again to meet up with Tom Birkin" (132). Gornick admits that she might not have been ready to understand Baker's novel the first time she read it. But now, because of Carr's *A Month in the Country*, she is more "receptive" to what the novel might be trying to do. This is the case for her re-reading of Elisabeth Bowen as well. Reading "what the poet Adrienne Rich had written about Emily Dickenson", Gornick discovers in it something she had previously felt but failed to put into words about Elizabeth Bowen (59).

Throughout *Unfinished Business,* Gornick illustrates how one might need to look back on what one thought one knew or understood and re-evaluate it in light of new experience or knowledge (see also, the revised stance on *The World is a Wedding*, p. 85).

In fact, re-reading nuances Criticism™ as an endeavour. It gives the critic the opportunity to see things anew. One could even argue that the history of criticism is predicated on an endless cycle of re-reading. After all, Criticism™ has its origins in Poststructuralism, a critical movement that instigated a large-scale re-reading of the Western literary and cultural canon. But, as noted earlier, there is a tendency to downplay this fact; a predilection for metanarrativising Theory, and to present *a* reading as fact. Above, Gornick illustrates the limits of a dominant critical perspective and how approaching the literary work with theory with a capital T might direct a reading in a specific direction. In other words, certain blind spots of critique (and Criticism™), are revealed by Gornick's practice of re-reading.

Consider Gornick's re-reading of the works of Colette, an author that had serious influence on her in girlhood: "When I came to read these books again for the first time in a half century, I found the experience unsettling…I came away with the bad taste of revised feelings in my mouth" (41). Gornick describes how Colette was intensely important for her and her friends because it seemed at the time that the work revealed to them not what they were but what they were to become (37). For several years, Gornick identifies strongly with Colette. The work that had the most impact was not *Chéri* (1920) but *The Vagabond* (1910) and *The Shackle*

(1913). Their depiction of love with capital L seemed to say that it is "the glory and despair equal of a woman's life" (40 – 41). Upon re-reading however, Gornick finds the protagonist, Renée's, situation neither glorious nor "transcending", but "shallow" (41). Homing in on Colette's depiction of Renée ageing, which Gornick having once found profound, now reveals itself to fail to fulfil some essential potential:

> And who but Colette could have failed so entirely to unpack it. Why, I found myself saying to her, have you not made a larger sense of things. … Let me put it this way: what young woman today could read Colette as I read her when I was young? (45)

In *Unfinished Business,* Gornick draws attention to the fact that a reading is always *a* reading and that under the influence of "revised feeling" an act of reading or an act of criticism need not always be in the imperative.

5 "THIS IS A FEMALE TEXT": Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the* Throat (2020)

5.1 "The shared text of our days"

"THIS IS A FEMALE TEXT" (3). This assertion both opens and closes the Irish poet Doireann Ní Ghríofa's first prose work, *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020). It is a statement that applies to Ní Ghríofa's book as a whole but also applies to the *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, an 18th century keen composed by a woman called Eibhlín Dubh. Moreover, it is also an appropriate label for Ní Ghríofa's unorthodox methodology. It is a methodology that emerges as the text unfolds, as Ní Ghríofa figures out how to write about Eibhlín Dubh in "her own way" (75).

Partly born out of what Ní Ghríofa describes as an obsession with Dubh, and partly born out of anger for the ways that Dubh's life, like the lives of countless other women, has been erased from the annals of history, *A Ghost in the Throat* is an intimate and personal story about Doireann Ní Ghríofa, the life of Eibhlín Dubh, and the years Ní Ghríofa spent in Dubh's and the *Caoineadh'*s company.

At a glance*, A Ghost in the Throat* is a complex text. It has traits of the lyrical essay, of memoir, of history, of literary biography, and even of translation. But it is perhaps best described as the realisation of Tompkins' wish for the type of criticism that "always take[s] off from personal experience", and that is a "chronicle of my hours and days" and written in a

"voice which can talk about everything" (173). Because *A Ghost in the Throat* is very much about its author, Doireann Ní Ghríofa. It is about her, as a mother, as a wife, as a daughter and as a woman. It is about an aborted medical degree, and it is about her becoming and being a poet. It is about the minutiae of her daily life, "milk, laundry and dishes, with nursery rhymes and bedtime stories, with split grocery bags, dented tins, birthday parties, hangovers and bills" (32). It is a minutia which nevertheless expands into a wider but no less intimate, personal history of complicated childbirths, illnesses both physical and mental, interpersonal relations and family. It is about Ireland now, and Ireland then. It is a personal history, and to some extent, a national one.

But then, *A Ghost in the Throat* is also about Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, an 18th century Irish noblewoman. In an interview with *City of Books* podcast, Ní Ghríofa expresses her delight and surprise that the host asks her to present not only herself but Eibhlín Dubh as well. Ní Ghríofa sees this as an affirmation of the understanding that her book is as much about Dubh as it is about herself (01.05.00 - 02.11.00). It is about Dubh's childhood, about her mother Máire, and Dubh's twin sister Mary. It is about Dubh's first brief marriage, and it is about her second, clandestine one, to Art O'Leary, of whose life and death the *Caoineadh* tells. Like Ní Ghríofa, Dubh can be described as a mother, a wife, a daughter, a poet, and a woman. These commonalities, shared by Dubh and Ní Ghríofa, are what links a woman in the 18th century to a woman in the 21st.

A Ghost in the Throat is a book-length answer to Felski's question: "Where's your theory of attachment?" (18) It is, of course, also about Power. Ní Ghríofa's foregrounding of female lives and voices is a response to their erasure from the historical and literary record. Felski means that to ask the former question rather than the latter is not about abandoning politics for aesthetics wholesale but about acknowledging that "art and politics" are about "connecting" and "imagining" (18). Here it is evident that Felski is in conversation with Sedgwick. "Reparative reading" after all, is no less attached to "a project of survival" than a suspicious or paranoid one (150). It is a conversation which Ní Ghríofa joins. First and foremost, Ní Ghríofa has written a book about the deep affinity that she feels to Eibhlín Dubh. It is an affinity which is not only reserved for Dubh but "through the shared text of our days" expands to connect women across time and space (6).

It is an attachment that begins with the *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, the poem where Ní Ghríofa first learns of Dubh. This is stanza xxxi:

> O my love and my sweetheart!

Should my howl reach as far
as grand Derrynane
and gold-appled Ceaplaing,
strong, the slim horsemen
and pale-hankied women
who would thunder in,
and their wails would be boundless
over Art, our own sweet scoundrel. (trans. Doireann Ní Ghríofa, 315 – 6)

Originally composed and performed by women at funerals, *a caoineadh* is a traditional Irish form of lament, or a keen. A keen is less like a formal elegy, and more like the tragic chorus in an Attic drama. (The "wail" in the above stanza is a clue as to how it would have been originally performed). Each chapter of *A Ghost in the Throat* is prefaced by an extract of the *Caoineadh*. Appended at the end is the *Caoineadh* in its original Irish, and on the facing page Ní Ghríofa's own English translation.

Ní Ghríofa tells the story of her infatuation with Dubh like this: "When we first met, I was a child and she had been dead for centuries" (10). Ní Ghríofa is eleven and a teacher tells the story about Eibhlín Dubh. Ní Ghríofa is intrigued but loses interest in the story quite quickly. When Ní Ghríofa comes across the poem again as a teenager, she finds Dubh's story much more engaging. Ní Ghríofa describes how she develops a "school-girl crush", and how she swoons over the "tragic romance" of Eibhlín's clandestine marriage, and the untimely and violent death of Art O'Leary (11). This time around the *Caoineadh* fully captures her imagination. Nevertheless, it is not until several years later that the poem truly finds its way into Ní Ghríofa's life. Amidst the struggles of motherhood, balancing the family finances, sleepless nights, breastfeeding infants, writing poetry in the small hours of the night – all while navigating the housing crisis in Ireland– during a move to Kilcrea, Ní Ghríofa encounters Dubh again. Kilcrea, Ní Ghríofa suddenly remembers, is where Art O'Leary is buried (15).

As she picks up the *Caoineadh* again, she is surprised that, "There were many more verses to the *Caoineadh* than I recalled… the poem's landscape came to life as I read, it was alive all around me… I felt myself in it…. I was startled to find Eibhlín Dubh pregnant again with her third child, as I was" (17). A parallel between her life and Dubh's is the beginning of a fierce attachment.

Ní Ghríofa sleeps with the *Caoineadh* beneath her pillow describing how, in the whirlwind of "grocery lists, vomiting bugs, Easter eggs, hoovering and electricity bills", and the birth of

her third son, "only the lines of the *Caoineadh* remained steadfast" (21). It is a story similar to that of Carson's, and to that of Gornick. Like Gornick re-reads her most beloved novels, she reads the *Caoineadh* it a number of times throughout her life. Like Carson with Albertine, Ní Ghríofa finds herself indelibly fascinated by the *Caoineadh,* and the woman at the heart of it: "In the margin [of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*], my pencil enters a dialogue with many previous versions of myself, a changeable record of thought, in which each questions mark asks about the life of the poet who composed the *Caoineadh*" (10). Like Carson, who desperately sought ways to remain a little longer in Proust's world, Ní Ghríofa goes in search for more about Eibhlín Dubh.

Most of what is known about Dubh is from the *Caoineadh,* but Ní Ghríofa "longs to know more" about its poet "before and after the moment of composition" (25). In her search she hopes to come across a text that "shares her wonder" (25). However, what she discovers about Dubh proves disappointing: "In the misguided hope that if I can simply exhaust my obsession it might come to bore me, eventually. It's a foolish approach… the more I read, the sharper my rage grows" (70). Despite being credited with one of the most celebrated Irish poems of the 18th century, it turns out that Dubh is a marginal figure in the historical and literary record of the period (37). Often, Ní Ghríofa finds, what is written about Dubh amounts to a variation of "*Wife of Art O'Leary"*, and "*Aunt of Daniel O'Connell"* (70). In fact, Dubh is pitifully peripheral, and most often defined by her relation to more famous male relatives and descendants.

Dissatisfied with these cursory mentions of Dubh and the sparse insight they give into Dubh's life Ní Ghríofa realises that to "honour Eibhlín Dubh's life" she might herself set out to build "a truer image of her days" (70). For Ní Ghríofa, as for many others, a gap in the knowledge precipitates her critical quest. This is what she writes:

> "I wonder what I might learn of Eibhlín Dubh's days were I to veer away from the scholarship I have simply accepted thus far. I think again of all those blunt, brief, sketches presenting this woman in the thin roles of aunt and wife…how might she appear if drawn in the light of the women she knew instead." (75)

Ní Ghríofa sets herself the critical task of "luring female lives back from male texts" with the intent to "sketch [Dubh's] years in my own way" (75). *A Ghost in the Throat* is ultimately, the realisation of this project, of a method developed and embodied.

5.2 On the Advantages of Being an Amateur

In a podcast episode titled "Writing Women's Lives & History", Ní Ghríofa states that she was very aware, as she set out to write the life of Dubh, that she was "intruding on a tradition" (03.01.00 - 03.08.00). In the text she describes herself as "an amateur paddling in the vast ocean of historical research" (225). But that Ní Ghríofa is an amateur is not *quite* true. She has an Arts degree, but is neither trained as a historian, literary critic or a translator, nor in many of the other tasks that she undertakes in her search for Dubh. There is a sense that she finds herself on unfamiliar ground. She argues that she lacks the professional qualifications of a person who might be better tasked for such an undertaking as she holds "no doctorate", "no permission-slip", no "professorship" (38). Elsewhere she states that she is "painfully aware" that she is "no scholar" (259). Rather, she is simply "a woman who loves this poem" (38). This, however, seems a fair motivation, especially considered in light of contemporary debate about the reasons why one might engage in literary critique. Think, again of Felski's "What about Love?", or Baskin's impassioned student. In fact, in the 18th and the 19th century, amateur – often synonymous with enthusiast – referred to someone who did a task out of love rather than for money.

In a sense, then, Ní Ghríofa might be considered an amateur. In "A Praise of Amateurism" (2020), Derek Attridge suggests that there are a number of advantages to being an amateur, especially in contrast to what he calls the "professional reader" (39). The professional reader, argues Attridge, often approaches a work of literature with a specific idea of *how to* read already in mind (39). However, he argues that "An amateur reading, no matter by whom, involves an openness to whatever the work, on a particular occasion, will bring – a readiness to have habits and preconceptions challenged and a willingness to be changed by the experience" (39). For Attridge, amateurism is not a sign of bad scholarship, despite the negative connotations the word has acquired over time. Rather, Attridge's description of an amateur reading is keeping with the spirit of what Carson and Ní Ghríofa describe as "wonder". Remember, Ní Ghríofa uses "wonder" as a verb, when she considers how Dubh's life might look written from another perspective. But she also uses "wonder" as a noun when she describes how she searches for someone to "share" in the "wonder" of the *Caoineadh*.

Furthermore, since Ní Ghríofa takes issue with how both scholarship and the historical record have marginalised Dubh, to find herself outside its hallowed circle might be to her benefit rather than to her detriment. Certainly, it enables her to consider alternative ways of writing about Dubh that feels truer to her experience.

5.3 Cixous and the *caoineadh:* Two Traditions of Female Writing

In the brief history of bad readers above, women are frequently painted as the worst of the type. They identified too closely with the texts they read and invested too much of themselves in them. Ní Ghríofa does not claim to maintain any rational distance to Eibhlín Dubh. Rather, it is the exact opposite. Ní Ghríofa throws all of herself into her reading.

One episode in Ní Ghríofa's text stands out as an excellent example. In this episode she describes a journey to Derrynane, the place where Dubh spent a large part of her childhood, in order "to see something that could deepen my sense of Eibhlín Dubh's early days here" (81). Her wanderings and ruminations are informed by a limited historical record, about dowry traditions, wedding customs, and a local tale about a bad omen that foretold the untimely death of Eibhlín's first husband, whom she was married off to at the age of fourteen (84 - 92). But because this is the sum of the information available to Ní Ghríofa, she also makes use of a degree of speculation and invention.

In *The Limits of Critique* Felski argues that Criticism™ seeks to assert some type of distance between "itself and its object" by affirming "its difference from what it describes and asserts its distance from the voices it ventriloquizes" (126). Ní Ghríofa's method is a rejection of this critical distance: it is close identification instead. Indeed, Ní Ghríofa describes how she spends the day walking the same narrow paths that Dubh might have run along as a child: "I've become so accustomed to listening for echoes in her life in the life I know that she feels as real as another seen presence… as I follow her struggle from Derrynane to her failed marriage and back again; she is as real as I am" (92). This is far from strictly archival research. (Not that Ní Ghríofa does not spend time in archives, she does). It is about seeing the same trees, immersing herself in the sights and smells of the forest until the line between her life and Dubh's become blurred enough for Ní Ghríofa to ask, "who is haunting who?" (178).

Certainly, one could take issue with the fact that Ní Ghríofa claims such a close relationship with Dubh although she "recognise[s] how deeply different Eibhlín Dubh's life is from mine, and yet, I can't help myself in drawing connections between us" (92). This is a problem she acknowledges herself: "If my desire to make her feel true makes of her a marionette then that makes me... what?" (154). Indeed, to what extent is it reasonable for Ní Ghríofa to claim that, despite the centuries that separate them, her and Dubh are so alike that Ní Ghríofa can map her experiences to those of Dubh's? Feel, as it were, as Dubh felt, and so on? The key here is, of course, that it is not always *reasonable*. Ní Ghríofa readily admits this by stating that her task is not "always a voyage of reason" (255).

Ní Ghríofa's method consists of both practical, pain-stalking research, and deeply felt subjective experience. These are interwoven, even more so as Ní Ghríofa interweaves her life with that of Dubh and the *Caoineadh*. Her method, confessedly, is an "unscientific mishmash" consisting of an amalgamation of "daydream and fact" (71). It is a daydream born out of necessity, as much as it is born out of Ní Ghríofa's indelible fascination with Dubh and her poem.

The parallels that Ní Ghríofa imagines between herself and Dubh are a way for Ní Ghríofa to imagine a history where there is none. In terms of historical information, Derrynane proves to be somewhat of a dead end. Ní Ghríofa laments that history had valued women's words higher. "All the diaries and letters and ledgers I imagine in female handwriting, they must have existed once, until someone tidied them into a waste bin, tipping them neatly into oblivion" (91). The visual enactment of this silence in Ní Ghríofa's text is striking. This is how it looks on page 91 (fig. 2.).

Here: silence.

Fig.2. From Doireann, Ní Ghríofa. *A Ghost in the Throat*. Tramp Press: Glasgow and Dublin, 2020.

An indented line: two words. Two blank lines before and after: a gap. For Ní Ghríofa the erasure of Eibhlín Dubh represents the erasure of countless female lives, and so her critical method is partly born out of an attempt to rectify this omission. Ní Ghríofa does not only share an affinity with Eibhlín Dubh, but also with Hélène Cixous. In her seminal essay, "the Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), Cixous argues that "in woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women" (882). This is a statement that bears striking resemblance to Ní Ghríofa who, as already pointed out above, asserts in her manifesto-like first chapter that she, Dubh, and other women are connected "by the shared text of [their] days" (6).

To modern readers, Cixous' suggestion of a "universal woman subject " seems a classic case of dated essentialism that lacks an intersectional perspective (882). This is a problem that Ní Ghríofa does not quite manage to avoid and maybe where her text falters somewhat. For Cixous as, to some extent, for Ní Ghríofa, to be a woman seems to be associated with a *certain* set of traits, and a *certain* set of experiences. Both texts fail however, to see that these traits or experiences are perhaps not universal. To be sure, they might be shared among many women, but certainly not all. Even though the "shared text of our days" is somewhat reductive, perhaps more a matter of unfortunate phrase than ill-intention, it is nevertheless the cornerstone of Ní Ghríofa's method. It is not necessary to dispute Ní Ghríofa's understanding

of her own text, that is the work of another kind of thesis, but it is necessary to explain and elaborate it. The argument of Cixous' essay is this: "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing… woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (875). In her reading, Ní Ghríofa puts herself into the text, and by refracting what she knows and imagines about Dubh's life through her own, she attempts to fill in the gaps in Dubh's history while simultaneously asserting the importance of her own.

In fact, Cixous argues that in contrast to "male writing", (879) which seeks to dominate, impose order on, or master its subject, a "feminine practice of writing" respects the fundamental difference of the Other (883). It is about letting the other approach, and about opening oneself to the text and its potential difference, rather than attempt to master it. In female writing, "language does not contain… When id is ambiguously uttered – the wonder of being several … she doesn't defend herself against these unknown women whom she's surprised at becoming but derives pleasure from this gift of alterability" (889). Woman, maintains Cixous, is not afraid of identification, but welcomes it (887). Similarly, Ní Ghríofa welcomes, even invites identification with Dubh. For Ní Ghríofa, this is at the core of her "female text".

Ní Ghríofa's text embodies some of Cixous' core ideas. But the literary form of the *caoineadh* is also key to understanding what it is that Ní Ghríofa attempts to do in *Ghost in the Throat*. It, too, represents a tradition of what Ní Ghríofa identifies as "female text" (4). Her title, *A Ghost in the Throat*, alludes to both the *Caoineadh* and the *caoineadh*. Once, she describes reciting it as "invit[ting] the ghost of another woman to haunt my throat for a while" (10). In the 18th century, poetry written to commemorate a "person or event" was usually commissioned by *taoisigh* "leaders of the old Gaelic Order", composed by male bards, and later written down in "handwritten anthologies" known as "*duanairí*" (73 - 4). In contrast poetry by women, such as the *caoineadh*, was "stored not in books but in female bodies, living repositories of poetry of song" (74). The tradition of the *caoineadh* is that of "collage", the work of many women together (74). It is a "literary genre worked and woven by women, entwining strands of female voices that were carried in female bodies" (74). "This is a female text" Ní Ghríofa writes, "which is also a *caoineadh*" (4). *A Ghost in the Throat* is a *caoineadh* written for Eibhlín Dubh, as much as it is about the *Caoineadh*, attributed largely to Dubh. It is a lament for Dubh's life, and the way it is missing from the historical and literary record, but it is also to honour her. Ní Ghríofa appropriates the form of the *caoineadh* as it

corresponds to the goal of her project: to recover and honour female voices. Moreover, Angela Bourke argues that the *caoineadh* was a literary form that functioned as a kind of permissible space within the confines of structural repression where "women" were allowed to "asserted their identity as women" (166).

As she, with radical transparency, details both her emotional and physical life Ní Ghríofa draws on this aspect of the *caoineadh* as well. *A Ghost in the Throat* is Ní Ghríofa's way of using her own voice, "lifted to another consciousness by the ordinary wonder of type" to join what she feels is a chorus of women across history, both past, present, and future (4).

At the end of her book, Ní Ghríofa describes how she has lived with Eibhlín Dubh for years. She describes how up to a certain point her translation of the *Caoineadh* and her search for the traces of Dubh's life have been, in many ways, a private project. She realises however, that it might not be to its benefit for it to remain so: "If I could find a way to communicate all that I had learned of her days, maybe others would discover the clues that eluded me, and I might learn more of her from them" (281). *A Ghost in the Throat* charts the development of a critical approach, *is* that critical approach enacted, and ultimately invites others to "join in" that critical approach (4).

6 Conclusion

6.1 "What could survive our education"

As I reach the end of the chapter on *A Ghost in the Throat*, I am reminded of a few lines from a novel I read some years ago. As I read, and re-read Carson, Gornick and Ní Ghríofa, the title of the work seems especially poignant (once, on p. 138, Ni Ghríofa describes her fascination with Dubh as being possessed). These lines are from *Possession* (1990), a novel by the British author A. S. Byatt. *Possession* is about two young literary scholars, Roland, and Maud as they investigate an undisclosed love affair between two Victorian poets. One night, not long after their first meeting, the conversation turns to why they have chosen to do what they do:

> 'And you? Why do you work on Ash?'
> 'My mother liked him. She read English. I grew up on his idea of Sir Walter Raleigh, and his Agincourt poem and Offa on the Dyke. And then *Ragnarök*.' He hesitated. 'They were what stayed alive when I'd been taught and examined everything else.'
> Maud smiled then. 'Exactly. That's it. What could survive our education.' (55)

The sentiment shared between the two protagonists of *Possession* is one that they have in common with the authors and critics of this thesis. In the debate about the state of

contemporary literary criticism there is a pervasive sense that the reasons for why one might engage with literature in the first place has become muddled, buried beneath methodological quibbles, and co-opted by ideological agendas. There is no denying that the three texts examined in this thesis owe a lot to the practices and theories of Criticism™. After all, Ní Ghríofa's debt to Cixous is undeniable and Gornick grew up with the second-wave feminists. Carson's exploration of Albertine plays with tropes of academic writing, and by doing so draws on a rich tradition. However, these texts do not align with the adage of Criticism™. They are neither "detached", "dispassionate", nor "sceptical". Rather, they seem to ask why one should treat with suspicion and detachment something one often comes to out of love, rage, or any other complex emotional response. As Carson and Ní Ghríofa put it, texts that one "wonders" about, or that inspire "wonder". Gornick shows that to find one's own experiences mirrored in literature can sometimes be uncomfortable or upsetting, but that these moments of revelation can enable different, or new understandings of the self and the world.

Historically, to ground one's reading in one's affective response has been considered a bad way to read, "anti-intellectual" and "sappy", to borrow some of Sedgwick's adjectives. Sedgwick planted the seeds for a reparative reading ultimately rooted in love. By imagining ways of reading differently, these three works branch off that very tree.

This is not to say that the types of reading exemplified in this thesis are not embroiled in or part of complex discursive, critical, and ideological arguments. One of the resounding, and resonating legacies of Poststructuralism is the recognition that, to some extent, one's personal and historical situatedness influences the way one reads and thinks. This is not denied in any of the texts. In fact, Gornick emphasises it through her statement that "Life and Politics" is indissoluble. Similarly, Ní Ghríofa – outraged at the erasure of Dubh from the historical record – actively works against the suppression and marginalisation of female lives by writing about the life of Dubh as well as about her own. However, Carson, Gornick and Ní Ghríofa are all authors of texts that foreground the power of the affective. They represent the opposite, I would argue, to the "suppression of the Reading-Subject" and the "anti-affective reading stance" and they assert this position as a valid origin point of criticism.

Three works are perhaps too few to draw a general conclusion about the ways that the rhetoric of criticism is changing. But perhaps it is useful to think of them as heralds of an emerging, in Kuhnian terms, paradigm shift, those incremental movements towards a large-scale reconstitution of the order of knowledge. After all, these works all reconsider what criticism has been historically, what it is at present, and what it can be in the future. Carson and Ní Ghríofa invite future and *further* critical consideration of their chosen subjects, while

chronicling their past. Gornick, by emphasising the transformative potential of understanding that re-reading can give the critic, does something similar.

In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski suggests that as one grows tired of the contextualist/historicist paradigm one might move towards "Postcritical reading", a term deliberately obtuse and vague because its purpose is to function as a "placeholder for emerging ideas and barely glimpsed possibilities" (173). Felski's sentiment is in line with the work done in these three texts, but her choice of words is a bit unfortunate. "Post-" is, after all, a notoriously contended prefix especially in literary criticism. What Felski means is, of course, that there is a need to move beyond the paranoid paradigm, the paradigm of Criticism™, not that criticism should be abandoned wholesale. In this case, rather than "Postcritical", Creative criticism works better as a type of umbrella term for the three texts surveyed in this thesis. Indeed, it works as a leitmotif. After all, it seems to embody the very opposite of the rigidity and inflexibility signified by the ™.

Historically, there has been a tendency to think of critique as derivative. To some extent, it is necessarily so. Critique is "a piece of writing" where "a text, creative work, or subject" is "analysed or evaluated" (*"critique", n.*). In other words, a critique is always a *response*. In Creative criticism, however, things are done differently. *The Albertine Workout*, *Unfinished Business* and *A Ghost in the Throat* take their departure in literary texts, but are not completely beholden to them, either in style or content. There is an elasticity in Carson's, Gornick's, and Ní Ghríofa's texts; a predilection for genre-bending. In this genre-mishmash, in these creative experiments, the search for new ways of doing criticism is explored. In other words, Creative criticism exemplifies different kinds of criticism that move beyond the boundaries of Criticism™. Here is where an affinity with *avant-garde* writing, particularly *avant-garde* writing that has a long history in feminist criticism emerges most clearly. Eschewing disinterested or rational approaches, all three texts imagine, through practice, new ways of reading and writing outside the stifling adages of normative critical rhetoric. They do not divorce themselves from earlier tradition but, rather, look back to its radical, inventive roots to again make new.

6.2 The Function of Criticism

At the beginning of this thesis, a question was posed: "Whither criticism". It is sentence that beings with an interrogative adverb that means, in essence, "to what place". As enrolment numbers are declining, and gloomy predictions about the future of the humanities both in the

universities and in culture at large abound, the cultural conversation has yet again turned to the function of criticism, and reasons why one might turn to literary studies in the first place.[3] However, historical, and contemporary debate have much in common. More than a century ago Matthew Arnold argued that criticism was too much beholden to worldly agendas (246). In a similar vein, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue that the goal of criticism under the contextualist/historicist paradigm is to some extent, part of larger projects, whether political or ideological, is criticism tethered to some grander purpose (2). In the three texts above however, grander conclusions might come as a result of the reading, but it might not be their main purpose.

Arnold, of course, maintained that criticism must be "disinterested", (246) and so here Arnold and our three authors disagree but he has a valid point in that, "Criticism must be sincere, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge" (258). Even if Arnold regarded the critical spirit as subordinate to the creative, (238) he agreed that a certain degree of creativity is necessary in criticism and that criticism continuously needs to reinvent itself.

In contrast to Arnold's "disinterestedness", Wilde argue a couple of decades later that rather than being a "disturbing element", "personality" is "an element of revelation" (33). Carson's, Gornick's and Ní Ghríofa's works of critique are born out of a desire to explore an intense personal interest. Rather than disinterested, here are three authors who are profoundly interested. Embodied in *The Albertine Workout, Unfinished Business*, and *A Ghost in the Throat*, is a case for –by various pathways, historical and modern – the turn to affect. I find that ultimately, Gornick, and Carson, and Ní Ghríofa all say, with slight variation, the same thing; "What do I love here?"; "What do I find fascinating here?"; "This moved me, or changed me, in some way". As the humanities yet again find themselves embroiled in questions of why they matter, the turn to affect offers a viable and persuasive answer.

[3] For the interested reader, a recent excellent summary is found in the "Introduction" of Reitter, Paul and Chad Wellmon. *Permanent Crisis: the Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2021.

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