**Abstract**

**The Selves of Reading: Personal, Professional, Common**

In *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (1983/1996), Terry Eagleton concluded his exploration of theoretical traditions which opened themselves to the study of ‘literature,’ with a brief rationale for the dissolution or erasure of the category of literature itself. “Methodologically speaking,” Eagleton wrote in the book’s final chapter, “literary criticism is a non-subject.” If there is no definitive methodological rationale for literary studies, ‘literature’ as a historical phenomenon is itself too varied, plastic and amorphous in its appearances to perform as a stable object of study, to give, that is, any compensatory stability to the discipline:

[t]he unity of the object is as illusory as the unity of the method. ‘Literature,’ as Roland Barthes once remarked, ‘is what gets taught.’ ” (Eagleton, p. 172)

For the Eagleton of the early 1980s, ‘literature’ could best be studied as one type of discourse amongst many; it should be studied alongside others in terms of the discursive effects it produced, and the manner and modes used to produce them. This was a project he aligned with the older traditions of rhetoric, “probably the oldest form of ‘literary criticism’ in the world.” (Eagleton, p. 179)

Eagleton’s advocacy for rhetoric’s replacement of ‘literature’ as the object of literary study was hardly scandalous in its own moment but the defeat of that moment has yet been celebrated as a return to questions of value, affect and aesthetic potency. Peter Boxall’s *Value of the Novel* (2015) somewhat gleefully compares the Eagleton of the 1980s to the Eagleton of *How to Read Literature* (2013), a book which for Boxall dramatizes how Eagleton has “turned full circle,” now endorsing “the principle of literary value – as an antidote to perceived cultural decline – fully as enthusiastically as Leavis and Richards.” (Boxall, p. 3)

Boxall aligns his own project – assessing the constitutive value-creating activities of fiction – with other contemporary critical urges to “reinvent a critical vocabulary with which to address literary value,” a critical project which, he notes, unifies the work of, for example, Dorothy Hale, Martha Nussbaum, Joshua Landy, Helen Small, Ray Ryan and Liam McIlvanney. (Boxall, p. 5)

The approach taken by Boxall in *The Value of the Novel* dramatizes one of the constituent moments in the current conflicted self-image of academic literary criticism, a dwelling on the reader’s intimate, private or personal relation with what she reads. A countervailing approach is suggested by John Guillory’s recent sociological exploration of literary study as a university discipline: *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organisation of Literary Study* (2022) Though resolutely refusing to critique past and present forms of literary study in the name of some preferable form, Guillory’s book is haunted by what the study of literature lost in contracting sufficiently to become the professional study of literature: when criticism became a profession, it lost its relationship to the traditions and resources of rhetoric.

This paper will use the recurrence of rhetoric to suggest that our current dilemma as scholars of literature is, at least in part, composed not of how to read (the terrain of the older ‘method wars’) but of how to conceptualise reading and the reader. It will argue against the affirmation of the ‘personal,’ evaluative or ‘lay reader,’ and consider how to revivify the ‘common reader’ not as a sociological phenomenon but rather as a matter of the rhetorical preconditions and properties of genres. If literary criticism is to survive the current hostile environment

**Paper: March 6th, 2023.**

Theory, Criticism, and Culture Seminar in the Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge

**The Selves of Reading: Personal, Professional, Common**

“Who, anymore, is the study of literature for, and what is it supposed to do?”

-Benjamin Kunkel, *NLR* 136, p. 84.

**Schema: The situation of HE Literary Studies now**

I want to sketch our situation or dilemma by using three corners or pins and opening up the possibility of a fourth. Three aspects: how potential students see us; how we see ourselves; how the Age of Amazon sees us or does not see us or sees us and doesn’t care. You might experience these three sections as a little disconnected. My apologies: I will attempt to relate them to one another in the closing section, the shadowy fourth pin or the plea to use the study of rhetoric to move to genre studies as our way of understanding literature and literary history. I am going to start with the ‘age of amazon.’

**1: The Age of Amazon.**

I take this phrase from Mark McGurl’s *Everything and Less: the Novel in the Age of Amazon* (2021), a book McGurl uses to explore whether or not Amazon should “now be considered the driving force of American, perhaps even world, literary history?” and relatedly, whether Amazon was “occasioning a convergence of the state of the art of fiction writing with the state of the art of capitalism.” (McGurl, p. 33) McGurl positions this ‘age’ as a periodising tactic, using it to sketch a “conceptual map with coordinates helpful to the task of interpretation even now, as the Program Era gives way … to the Age of Amazon” (McGurl, p. 205) in a move which he relates to a ‘new institutionalism’ in scholarly approaches to contemporary literature:

[p]art of the point of this book’s strategic re-periodization of the present as the Age of Amazon is to put popular genre fiction – the bread and butter of the KDP world and of Kindle-enabled consumption in general – at the center of scholarly concern rather than at the margins where it usually finds itself. Beginning with the novel’s generic appeal to the ordinary reader, the idea of literature as either an arbiter of cultural values, or engine of cultural capital formation, or equipment for moral improvement recedes before a conception of reading as everyday self-care; as the repetitive provision of the pleasurable sensation of the meaningfulness of life. (McGurl, p. 205-206)

Beginning its life in 1995 as an online bookshop, Amazon is not yet 30 years old and yet now accounts for more than 50% of annual book purchases in the US. In 2022, roughly 10% of Amazon’s global revenue was from book sales, about $28 billion. Amazon was responsible for approximately half of all the sales of the ‘big 5’ global publishing companies: Penguin/Random House (Bertelsmann); Hachette Book Group (Hachette Livre, Lagardère); Harper Collins (Murdoch); Simon and Schuster (Bertelsmann purchase blocked in 2021/22); Macmillan (Macmillan Group). The proportion of e-books sold by Amazon is even higher and Amazon’s introduction of the Kindle e-reader in 2007 “unquestionably made” the market for electronic books even if it did not invent it. (McGurl, p. 34) The sale of e-books made up 21% of Amazon’s total book sales by revenue in 2022 – or 36% in terms of number of books sold. With the Amazon Unlimited e-book subscription, the number of pages a Kindle-reader/subscriber reads is the basis for the royalty system: royalties are paid to writers on the basis of pages read rather than titles downloaded.

Amazon’s market share when it comes to e-books is 68% before even looking at the books that Amazon have published themselves or the books within Kindle Unlimited. With these figures factored in, it is thought that Amazon may be responsible for up to 85% of all e-book sales.

(https://wordsrated.com/amazon-book-sales-statistics/)

Critically, Amazon is also a publisher. Under its 16 separate imprints, Amazon publishes approximately 1,000 new titles a year, each – as McGurl puts it – “tied to a separate genre, including one for literary fiction called Little A … [demoted] to the status of one genre among many.” (McGurl, p. 35)

The Little A imprint describes itself as “the literary fiction and nonfiction imprint of Amazon Publishing. From compelling novels to riveting memoirs, Little A publishes thought-provoking titles that challenge and excite.”

Lake Union publishing works with “compulsively readable, infinitely shareable fiction,” offering “absorbing works of contemporary and historical fiction for voracious readers.” Montlake does romance, Thomas and Mercer mysteries, thrillers and true crime. Amazon Crossing does world literature in translation; 47 North does SF and fantasy; Skyscape teen and young-adult fiction.

<https://amazonpublishing.amazon.com/our-imprints.html>

Running alongside what we can loosely call these traditional imprints is Kindle Direct Publishing or KDP Amazon’s self-publishing platform. An author can publish with Amazon for 30% of the proceeds on any electronic text sold. Coupled with a print-on-demand service (also Amazon’s since 2005, CreateSpace folded into KDP in 2018), and with Brilliance Audio (bought by Amazon in 2007) and Audible.com (bought in 2008), self-published authors have e-copy and non-e-copy formats, and aural versions, of their works ready to be sold. Kindle also feeds back page-by-page reader statistics, not just figures of what is being sold but of what is being read. In this way, Amazon is “intensely more observant of the realities of reading than publishing has ever been before.” In 2017, Amazon introduced a bifurcated bestseller list – the most sold and the most read.

Finally, Amazon owns Goodreads – a platform for the reviewing of literature which has over 100 million ‘data-mineable’ registered users.

Via all its many arms, and its frenetic centralising activities, Amazon knows more about readers and writers, and is more intimately knowledgeable about the relationship between them, than any publisher before it. It isan institutional mediator incredibly sensitive to what works in a publication, what is not just sold but read, then positively reviewed or ignored, imitated or left in isolation, and lauded or silent. This makes Amazon a centripetal force not only in market terms but in terms of the waxing and waning of particular genres, and of the narrative conventions, the stylistic and formal devices, which are dominant in any genre at any time. There is a speeded-up and intensified feedback loop between publication and reader-response.

But just as much as it is a centralising force in the market, it is also a force working towards differentiation. Amazon wants to sell and its writers wish to be read: genres fragment and those fragments proliferate. Erotic fiction erupts into multiple distinct narrative formations, for example, each of them enjoying a market, however small, until they do not. As McGurl describes this differentiating work of Amazon’s market-place, it is possible to see how ‘the novel’ as such ceases to be fiction’s operative category: in this system

the ‘novel’ per se – the genre described in critical discourse on ‘the rise of the novel,’ and brought to a high point of achievement in the realist tradition of Austen, Eliot, and James – is not particularly important except as a unit of discourse in the formation of a trilogy or longer series. Offering tested models of market success, genre is important to indie writers because it implies the existence of an audience ready to be pleased again and again within the terms of an implicit contract. Success and even a highly qualified version of originality, in this system are the results of effective variation and permutation within established generic structures.” (McGurl, p. 52)

Back in 2000, when Franco Moretti first published his essay on formal mutation and cultural variation and selection in the market for literature, ‘The Slaughterhouse of Literature,’ he wrote that when looking for what was responsible for the commercial success of a certain type of detective story in the late Victorian period, he had realised that the “market selects the canon,” the market selects what survives, what thrives and what is relegated to that terrible silence in the slaughterhouse of literature. On how the ‘market’ works as a selecting mechanism, Moretti quotes the model constructed by two economic theorists who turned their attention to the ‘motion picture industry,’ Arthur De Vany and W. David Walls:

Film audiences make hits or flops … not by revealing preferences they already have, but by discovering what they like. When they see a movie they like, they make a discovery and they tell their friends about it; reviewers do this too. This information is transmitted to other consumers and demand develops dynamically over time as the audience sequentially discovers and reveals its demand … A hit is generated by an information cascade … A flop is an information bandwagon too; in this case the cascade kills the film.

(De Vany and David Walls (1996), ‘Bose-Einstein Dynamics and Adaptive Contracting in the Motion Picture Industry,’ cited by Franco Moretti (2000) ‘The Slaughterhouse of Literature,’ in *Distant Reading* (2013), p. 69)

Demand at this moment in cultural history, the 1990s (and Moretti argues the same can be argued for the fiction market in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), could be thought of as dynamic and sequential and above all in its early moments dispersed or what Moretti terms ‘*poli*centric’ – “thousands of independent moviegoers, without hidden puppeteers of any sort” – but becoming, by its conclusion as a process, “extraordinarily centralised.” It is a ‘feedback loop’ – past consumer choices create increasing returns as ‘past successes are leveraged into future successes’ – and 20% of the films earn 80% of the box office revenues.

And the centralisation of the literary market is exactly the same as for films. After all, this is precisely how the canon is formed: very few books, occupying a very large space. This is what the canon is.

(Moretti, ‘The Slaughterhouse of Literature,’ p. 69-70)

Moretti’s system had the market working in a feedback-loop whose two moments are distinct – one polycentric, one centralised – even as centralisation was almost the predestined terminus of that loop for the 80% of films which did not make money, and for the 20% which did. With Amazon, we can see those two moments moving more closely together, the feedback loop tightening. With Amazon Kindle Unlimited, with its steady count of pages read and who is doing the reading, where close to 60% of the books available are self-published, each writer earns the feedback in terms of pages read and follows the market accordingly, the feedback loop is almost instantaneous

When ‘The Slaughterhouse of Literature’ was published, Moretti’s challenge was to draw attention to how much of the literature of the past was not read by scholars. He paraphrased Hegel’s aphorism that the history of the world is the slaughterhouse of the world to point out that a possible 99.5% of the novels published in Britain in the C19th – for example - do not get read by scholars – and that is giving the ‘canon’ of C19th British Literature which does get studied some leeway as it is hardly 0.5% of all published novels now if it ever was. Moretti’s point then – and my point now – is that the “majority of books disappear forever.” (Moretti, p. 66) Disappear they do, from reading lists, from curricula and from scholarship but not from the world of readers and writers, the world of the post-industrial service economies where institutional agents like Amazon are shaping and reshaping the literary field of both readers and writers on a daily basis, and not from the system of genres where success or failure are codified and handed on as narrative forms, stylistic devices, modes of address, in the momentum of a feedback process ever-more tightly geared to the actions of readers themselves

**2: How potential students see us?**

I wanted to include this section as it is seems to me nonsensical to attempt to figure out the current ‘exhaustion of literary studies,’ or the wider crisis of humanities in which that exhaustion is usually situated, without putting firmly at the centre of our understanding the consequences of political choices made and exercised on the terrain of higher education. That term (‘exhaustion of literary studies’) is one so pervasive now that I won’t attribute it to Joseph North’s *Literary Criticism: a Concise Political History* (2017) or to John Guillory’s *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organisation of Literary Study* (2022). It arguably goes back to the turn of the millennium itself where it began to appearin rejections of the hermeneutics of suspicion, the move beyond ‘critique,’ and the return to questions of ‘value’ or of ‘aesthetics’ in literary study.

How do students see us? This is the question the most highly paid minds in universities pore over – senior managers and their colleagues in recruitment and marketing departments need to know not how specific subjects are seen (the crude data of admissions and of the NSS work for that) but how their university is seen. They generally are not very good with the answers. The figure of the student they generate is one which can be sketched out in broad strokes. Students see us (universities here not disciplines) as guarantors of debt, hence committed to ‘relevance,’ ‘employability’ and ‘satisfaction.’ Nathan Heller in a recent *New Yorker* article, ‘The Decline of the English Major,’ wrote that for “decades now, the cost of education has increased overall ahead of inflation. One theory has been that this pressure, plus the growing precariousness of the middle class, has played a role in driving students … toward hard-skill majors. (English majors, on average, carry less debt than students in other fields, but they take longer to pay it down.)” I want to move to the situation in the UK in a minute but one more word from Heller:

During the past decade, the study of English and history at the collegiate level has fallen by a full third [in the USA]. Humanities enrollment in the United States has declined over all by seventeen per cent ... What’s going on? The trend mirrors a global one; four-fifths of countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation reported falling humanities enrollments in the past decade.  
(Heller, ‘The Decline of the English Major,’ *The New Yorker*, Feb. 28th, 2023)

In the Summer of 2021, there was consternation in English Universities as by the January application deadline of the admissions cycle that year, 7,045 18-year-olds in the UK had applied to study English **at university**, a fall of more than a third from 10,740 in 2012. The data here is from UCAS, the admissions service. HE policy research, teachers and academics all said it was possibly due to the collapse in numbers of students studying English (language and/or literature) at A-level. Over the same period there was a significant increase in applications for STEM subjects such as computer science, psychology and maths.

Many commentators pointed to Michael Gove’s education curricula reforms at GCSE level, in 2013 and 2014, the last days of the Coalition Government:

Our changes will make these [GCSE] qualifications more ambitious, with greater stretch for the most able; will prepare young people better for the demands of employment and further study; will address the pernicious damage caused by grade inflation and dumbing down, which have undermined students’ achievements for far too long; and will give pupils, parents, teachers, universities and employers greater confidence in the integrity and reliability of our qualifications system.

…

The [English language GCSE](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-english-language-and-gcse-english-literature-new-content) will provide all students with a robust foundation of reading and good written English, and with the language and literary skills which are required for further study and work. It will ensure that students can read fluently and write effectively, and will have 20% of the marks awarded for accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar. It will also encourage the study of literature for those who do not take the English literature GCSE, with students reading high-quality texts across a range of genres and periods.

The new [English literature GCSE](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-english-language-and-gcse-english-literature-new-content) will build on this foundation, and encourage students to read, write and think critically. It will involve students studying a range of intellectually challenging and substantial whole texts in detail including Shakespeare, 19th-century novels, Romantic poetry and other high-quality fiction and drama. The new GCSE will also ensure that all students are examined on some ‘unseen’ texts, encouraging students to read widely and rewarding those that can demonstrate the breadth of their understanding.

(Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove’s ‘Written Statement to Parliament,’ November 1st, 2013. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/reformed-gcses-in-english-and-mathematics>)

The year before Gove’s changes, in 2012, English was the most popular **A-level: 90,000 UK** students were taking it. After Gove’s changes numbers decreased quite drastically - in 2019, for example, 57,000 students sat English A-Levels that summer, a decrease of a third since 2012 (Ofqual’s figures).

By the summer of 2022 (*The Evening Standard*) “English literature has fallen out of the top 10 most popular subjects at A-level for the first time. It saw the biggest drop in candidates for a single subject with more than 1,000 entries, falling by 9.4% from 39,492 in 2021 to 35,791 this year.” (<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/english-alevels-geoff-barton-england-gcse-b1019404.html>)

Add to this scenario, the ever more encompassing stress on employability articulated by state, by schools and by universities alike.

Following several related announcements of closure of English Literature courses in the UK in 2019, Gavan Williamson, then Secretary of State for Education “enraged many academics in the arts and humanities when he said in a [speech in February](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-speaks-at-launch-of-digital-learning-review) that universities must focus on technical courses and filling gaps in the labour market “instead of pushing young people on to dead-end courses that give them nothing but a mountain of debt’ ” (https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jun/19/novelists-issue-plea-to-save-english-degrees-as-demand-slumps#:~:text=Williamson%20enraged%20many%20academics%20in,but%20a%20mountain%20of%20debt%E2%80%9D.)

The TEF’s graduate outcomes translates the student into a canny consumer who can minimise financial risk by choosing to study at those higher-education institutions (HEIs) which can ‘evidence’ good jobs/good futures for their graduates. This is particularly a problem for humanities subjects at those post-92 HEIs whose degrees do not carry ‘the edge’ a Russell Group or Oxbridge equivalent would do. The Teaching Excellence Framework, stalled and stuttering for over 7 or 8 years but working internally to reorient universities’ work measures excellence in a number of areas: teaching quality, the learning environment, and the educational and professional outcomes achieved by students. Run now by the [Office for Students](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/) (OfS), its purported function is to enable university applicants to make informed choices by ensuring HEIs measure what they do in ways translatable into a league table of success. ‘Progression’ or the metric which captures the destination of Leavers of HE (DLHE) is the metric for graduate outcomes: where are our students six months out from graduation. ‘Success’ here is a graduate-level job or further study.

The list of Universities cutting Literature courses or making efficiencies with literature staff: Sheffield-Hallam, Cumbria, Birkbeck, Roehampton, Wolverhampton, Leicester, Portsmouth, and more recently, possible, UEA.

I wanted to stress that the situation with falling enrolments which has of late had such a presence in work on the future of literature studies is something which is not directly a consequence of student choice but is rather part of the nexus of state higher-education policy, debt regimes and the narrowing of how institutions address students. This is important to stress, I think, as otherwise, we might assimilate the fall in numbers studying literature to some cloudy end-of-literature understanding of our own historical moment. That is a move avoided by Benjamin Kunkel in his *NLR* essay(136, July/August 2022) on Joseph North’s program for literary criticism. In ‘Critic, Historicise Thyself!,’ Kunkel writes that that North’s program “both centred and catalysed a mood of crisis among professors of literature … the assessment that academic literary studies is in trouble.” The

general features of the crisis are shrinking enrollments in undergraduate literature programmes and a corresponding reduction in job openings, let alone tenure-track positions, in university literature departments. Less easily measured but perhaps equally demoralising are the loss of time and concentration necessary for serious reading among those who do enroll in lit courses; the erosion of methodological self-confidence among those who teach them; and, finally, beyond the campus, what appears to be a steep and ongoing decline in the cultural salience of literature across the first decades of this century … (Kunkel, *NLR*, p. 84)

**Section 3: How we see ourselves**

In *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organisation of Literary Study*, John Guillory picked up on each of the threads or facets of Kunkel’s diagnosis of trouble in literary studies.

* The fall in student numbers choosing to do English at u/g level; the competition amongst PhDs for fewer and fewer jobs in literature departments as full-time jobs are liquidated into more fungible casual contracts.
* Guillory adds also the ‘malaise that inhibits the professoriate from honestly negotiating its curricular problem,’ a malaise which has issued *inter alia* in a concentration on global Anglophone writings – transnational and postcolonial - as an improvement on the “supposedly nationalist and imperialist” canons – embodied in historical British and American literature (Guillory, p. 239)
* the erosion of methodological self-confidence among those who teach this declining student population.For Guillory, this is the basis for the return of questions of judgement to the discipline: for “a discipline fatigued with its usual aims – rightly or not – the aesthetic/ critical rationale has recovered a certain appeal. The revival of interest in the aesthetic, though it has something of a perennial aspect, appears of late to be in earnest, a reassertion of judgement as the legitimate practice of all readers of literature – scholars, reviewers, students and the reading public, whoever they are.” (Guillory, p. 377)
* What Kunkel describes as a decline in the ‘cultural salience of literature’ and the related ‘loss of time for serious reading’ both in and beyond the campus, Guillory also touches on. The following is a passage towards the end of his book, a passage on the ‘situation of literature as a medium in our time’ and the ‘uncertainty of aesthetic pleasure’ in relation to it: the “greatest problem for teachers of literature today is the fact that literature is no longer, as it once was, the principal source of entertainment for those able to read. Nor is it the principal means of achieving cultural distinction of the sort that once motivated the European bourgeoisie. The waning of literary culture is a ‘media situation’ that is probably irreversible, but it does not mean that literature has ceased to be entertainment. It means rather that creating the conditions for aesthetic pleasure in the ancient technology of writing has become more difficult, more likely to fail. For those who make the effort to read, failure can be related to many causes: the alien cultures represented in older narratives, the difficulty of literary language, the density of information content, or a break with the dominant aesthetic modes of the moment. All of these eventualities frustrate our desire to induce in our students, in the reading public, and even in ourselves, the pleasurable response that is the condition of everything else that comes after, including the work of scholarship.” (Guillory, p. 379)

This then is our situation: externally and institutionally battered, continually unpopular, arguably irrelevant except as a route to a graduate job – with the object of our discipline, ‘literature,’ always ill-defined and epistemologically shaky, looking set to disintegrate into the remnants of past traditions and the winners of prizes today.

Guillory – who resists posing ‘solutions’ to the dilemmas he traces – insists we continue to see ourselves as professionals. The organisational form of the profession is not the same as the discipline. The latter involves a process of differentiation from other disciplines whereas professionalisation “though founded on specialisations, evolve[s] towards an identity of institutional practice” in a process of institutional isomorphism which results in our having more in common as colleagues with biologists, political economists and historians at our own and other universities, than with others in equivalent professional roles.

Our discipline has ill-defined but radical aims (the critique of society, social improvement, equality, the recovery of historical voices) ; our profession is quiescent, ‘happily’ conforming to professional practices (Guillory, p. 67)

As with North, Guillory interprets recent and contemporary academic appeals to what he terms ‘lay-readers’ as both a response to the dilemma sketched in the above, and as insufficient to their own aims. Treating the demarcation between lay reading and professional reading as a consequence of a complex process which involves both the spread of literacy and the contraction of the public for literature, Guillory argues that the distinction between the types of reader is at the same time an articulation of a severe demarcation between judgment and interpretation.

Guillory traces the historical movement from the institutionalisation of the common reader (guided by critics in a public sphere) to the professional reader – a historical development mediated in part by the University’s needs, and in part by the prized ‘difficulty’ of a consciously non-mass-culture modernism. The latter alienated the ‘common reader’ in

an event that was entangled in the complex fractioning of the cultural domain, affecting all forms of cultural production …. When this struggle [between ‘high modernist’ culture and new media culture] began, its outcome in a thoroughgoing distinction between lay and professional modes of reading was by no means obvious or perhaps even assured. In any case, a defense of modernism such as we find in Robert Graves and Laura Riding’s important *Survey of Modernist Poetry* projected a reading public that was rapidly bifurcating into those who were receptive to the experiments of the modernists and those who were resistant, those Graves and Riding called ‘plain readers.’ ” (Guillory, 328)

At first, the professional readers, the academics, were not the champions of the difficult readings of modernism. That came later. But when it came, it formed the basis of the self-identity of the types of reading which were to constitute academic reading:

While we certainly know this story in its outlines, in my view we have not yet taken in the significance of the fact that professional reading did not emerge until a cadre of professors found the means of defending modernism by developing an autonomous reading practice, removed from the immediate aim of instructing the lay reader and addressed primarily to other scholars of literature.

This autonomous reading practice is embedded in academic models of literary criticism, and in the professional understanding of that discipline. It is a reading practice and a model of criticism disinterested in if not defined against aesthetic judgement, judgements of value: making

reading professional entailed both the institutional relocation of criticism and its redefinition … [C]riticism was reoriented in the 1940s and ‘50s *from the judgment of literature to the interpretation of literature.* The necessity of interpretation was occasioned initially by the difficulty of the modernists, but interpretation proved to be too interesting and generative to be restricted to new writing. (Guillory, 329, my italics)

For Guillory, all

lay readers are judges of what they read and, when called upon to defend their judgements, can usually summon arguments. But lay readers are often resistant to interpretation, for reasons that are at once obvious and hard to address. It is just here that the gap between lay and professional readers yawns widest, enlarging into a no-man’s land of mutual hostility. There is a surprising irony in this situation when we consider the uses to which interpretation has been put since the later nineteenth century. *For professional literary critics, interpretation has become criticism. Our discipline has appropriated the name of criticism as the aim of interpretation, or what we now call ‘critique.’ We do not recognise that, in fact, criticism is what lay readers practice intuitively, whenever, they judge the works they read to be good or bad, even when that judgement is expressed in the simple terms of liking or disliking*. (Guillory, p. 329-330, my italics)

This then is the dilemma arguably articulated by recent interventions in the field of literature: from ‘surface reading,’ ‘distant reading,’ ‘post-critique,’ to the return of the personal in the languages of affect, character, value and taste. Guillory explicitly treats the “ ‘post-critical’ manifestoes of Rita Felski, Sharon Marcus, Stephen Best” (Guillory, p. 330) as an academic version of the resistance to interpretation exercised by lay-readers before going on to detail and defend the “disciplinary mode of reading, ‘professional reading,’ ” a mode he outlines as characterised by four particular features. Professional reading is ***work,*** it is a ***disciplinary*** activity, is ***vigilant***, is a ***communal*** practice. By ‘communal,’ here, Guillory means that this mode of reading “envisions an audience of students or scholars, in the classroom or in print. These performed ‘readings’ thus submit to the response and judgement of other professional readers.” (Guillory, p. 331)

Lay reading on the other hand is practised at the site of ***leisure,*** is governed by ***conventions*** generated by the composition and distribution of leisure-time, is motivated primarily by the experience ***of pleasure***, and lay reading is largely a ***solitary*** practice.

Guillory’s account of the incommensurability of professional and lay reading is pretty devastating. I will reproduce it here: given, he writes, this incommensurability,

it should be evident why contemporary literary study has been tempted to resort to a political fantasy in order to describe its effects in the world. Those of us who are professional readers cannot hope to see our reading practice simply replicated outside the academy. On the contrary, the difference between professional and lay reading grows ever more pronounced, given, on the one hand, that professionalisation is an ever more complex process, and, on the other, that so many other activities compete with reading for leisure time. (Guillory, p. 333)

Rather than see the line of demarcation between lay readers and professional readers as identical with the border between judgment and interpretation, however, I wish to suggest that the line would be better thought of as the line between genre reading and non-genre reading. I am speaking here only of novels as this argument requires the history of novels and the current question mark around the survival of ‘the novel’ not as a commodity per se but as a unit or category of reading in the ‘age of Amazon.’

Outside the sphere of a self-consciously ‘literary fiction,’ (and possibly within that too if we take seriously the need to treat such fiction as its own genre or sub-genre of the novel), we read genres when we read novels. Those genres know us in terms of our commitment to their conventions, our need for both repetition of what is known and the sprinkle of novelty to ensure familiarity does not tip over into tedium.

At one point, Guillory asks why non-academic modes of reading – those ‘other worlds of reading’ currently yearned after by some scholars – “should be the business of literary criticism at all?” He is responding here to Michael Warner’s essay ‘Uncritical Reading,’ published in 2004 in the collection edited by Jane Gallup, *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*. Warner had looked to students as possessors of personal or ‘uncritical’ relations to favourite texts – though interestingly not to ‘literature.’ He used the phrase “ ‘the unconscious of the profession’ ” during his essay to refer to the relation between critical/paranoid/impersonal modes of reading, and those ways of reading for pleasure, the ‘uncritical’ modes which haunt the former.

When Guillory glosses Warner’s formulation, he does so in terms which open up for us quite clearly the limits of Guillory’s usefulness for us – and by extension, the limits of the institutional approach. I will reproduce Guillory’s words here:

When Warner says that uncritical reading is the ‘unconscious’ of the profession, he must mean that it is the professoriate’s typical disregard for these worlds [of reading/non-critical reading] that constitutes a repression, a threat to critical reading itself. The problem for literary scholars is not that we are unaware of reading outside the academy, but rather that these modes of reading reveal the limits of the discipline’s reach, the failure of its great expectations, our delusory self-justification. (Guillory, p. 93)

But these ‘other modes of reading,’ these non-critical or personal, ordinary or amateur or lay modes of reading do not belong only to worlds outside the university. They enter into the university, into literature departments and literary scholarship, sedimented in genres and in the genre system which holds those genres and the market-place through which they are mediated.

Genres are informal or unwritten social contracts: this is how we have thought of them for decades. But if we conceptualise genres diachronically as well as synchronously, as moving that contract through time so that contract becomes enriched with its past and present, its narrative forms volatilised also by uncertainty about its future, then we can see genre as narrative in its social form, the specifically social – rather than singular – mode of existence of fiction per se, and of the modes of reading which fiction assumes, calls out to, and reproduces.

There can, that is, be no personal reader, no personal mode of reading. Modernity’s public is indeed a public made up of ‘private readers,’ but like every other manifestation of that self of modernity’s – its privateness intensely social but nevertheless as inviolate as the private property which grounds it – the modes of reading we practise when we engage with fiction as just ourselves (ordinary readers), are called forth by specifically social requirements.

It is as responses to “specifically social requirements” that Franco Moretti characterised rhetoric in ‘The Soul and the Harpy’ (1983). Rhetoric, Moretti asserts, has a “social, emotive, partisan character, in short an *evaluative* character. To persuade is the opposite of to convince. The aim is not to ascertain an intersubjective truth but to enlist support for a *particular* system of values.” (Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 3, Moretti’s italics) And a little later, Moretti writes of rhetoric’s address to “ ‘feeling,’ ” an address it must make “precisely because it is concerned with evoking and disciplining the most purely *social* parts of us.” (Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p.5, Moretti’s italics)

Value and the personal, the personal as a writerly mode of address rather than an embodied response, value as what is most social even as it might be most felt, these features of rhetoric – or of these ways of understanding the operations of rhetoric – suggest a way to develop a literary criticism which takes as its object not literature but the genres literature has its lives in.