INTRODUCTION

Critiquing Criticism: From the Ancient to the Digital

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In a 2000 article in the *New Left Review* Franco Moretti proposes a new methodology of literary history, a way to work with a far larger canon of literature. 'Distant reading' is put forward by Moretti as a way to return 'to that old ambition of *Weltliteratur*'; he argues that in following his model

> … literary history will quickly become very different from what it is now: it will become "second hand": a patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading*. Still ambitious, and actually even more so than before (world literature!); but the ambition is now directly proportional *to the distance from the text*: the more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be.[1]

Five years later, in 2005's *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, Moretti's radical approach to literary historical criticism is presented in a series of diagrams, analyses of data, including a graph of '*British novelistic genres, 1740–1915 (duration in years)*', a map of the '*spatial division of labour*' in Mary Mitford's *Our Village*, and a tree diagram of '*Free indirect style in modern narrative, 1800–2000*'.[2] As Moretti affirms in the introduction to the study, 'distant reading' is 'where distance is […] not an obstacle, but *a specific form of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection. Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models'.[3]

Moretti's data-mining uses methods of critical analysis grouped commonly under the aegis of the variously-defined Digital Humanities, an expanding arena of humanities academia that develops and challenges the field. Digital Humanities has gained increased attention, and a demand has developed for university departments to engage with its research and teaching. Resources spawned by computing techniques have filtered down and found wide audiences of academics: for example Imperial College's 'Concord' project, 'an online library of concordances, using texts publicly available from online repositories such as Project Gutenberg', applies the capabilities of search engines and hypertexts to an existing form of critical resource – the concordance – adding to its usability and usefulness and creating a valuable tool for readers and teachers of texts including Plato's *Republic,* Shakespeare's sonnets, and the novels of Dostoevsky.[4] Meanwhile digital publishing – a

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[1] Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1 (January-February 2000), <http://newleftreview.org/II/1/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature> [accessed 07/01/16].

[2] Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 1.

[3] Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, p. 1. Timothy Brennan has made a suggestive and irreverent link between Moretti's 'distant reading' and Pierre Bayard's 2007 *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*. (Brennan, 'A Confusion of Categories: Literary Authority in the Age of the General Author', talk delivered at 'Contemporary Critical Performances of the Author Role', Lancaster University, 27th November 2014).

[4] <http://www.doc.ic.ac.uk/~rac101/concord/> [accessed 19th December 2016].

tenet of Digital Humanities – has opened a fertile and confusing space between the norms of academic publishing forms and processes, and the immediacy and freedom of the internet. Debates rage over open access online academic publishing: challenging the modes, conventions, structures, and aims of criticism. As new and aspiring academic critics we must critique our own changing field, finding our place within it; an appraisal of criticism itself forms thus a crucial area for investigation.

In response, our focus in this year's issue is literary criticism and critical theory. By way of introduction to 'Critiquing Criticism: From the Ancient to the Digital' we will explore varying forms of academic and non-academic literary criticism and open up our discussion of what might be considered critical activity. This includes reading and writing literature as criticism and vice versa, a blurring of categories which emphasises the potential for creativity in criticism; traditional, so-called 'REF-able' forms such as the article, book chapter, and monograph, central to both critical and theoretical approaches; online literary magazines, and academically-informed online cultural analysis and commentary; and online academic publishing, from digital versions of established forms to innovative developments. Book reviews, literary prizes, and the 'like's, shares, and interactions of social media are arguably also acts of criticism worthy of our consideration. By including unconventional or unexpected activities of criticism along with changing forms of critical writing and literature itself in a discussion of literary criticism, we hope briefly to emphasise how criticism creates and relies upon communities of initiated or interested others. Our engagement with these communities plays out in a multitude of ways. As our four articles explore, challenges to the norms of criticism have arisen in a variety of forms. The predominantly modern examples that we discuss in this introduction are some of the most recent manifestations of an ongoing evolution of critical modes; the latest in a series of provocations for meta-critical analysis.

Reading literature as criticism takes many guises. We can read a rewriting, such as Margaret Atwood's 2005 novella *The Penelopiad*, as involving inherent modes of critique – in Atwood's case perhaps as a response to and comment upon narrative and gender in and beyond the *Odyssey*. Literature which openly references or parodies other literary and non-literary texts also performs a critical act. For example, Ovid's use of the conventions of love-poetry in the 'Narcissus and Echo' episode of the *Metamorphoses* mocks both Narcissus and the stock 'spurned lover/poet' character and set phrases of such contemporary Augustan verse (as written by a younger Ovid, amongst others). A critical role is fulfilled more explicitly in Jorge Luis Borges' work: confusions of essay, parable, and short story concerned with mysteries, writers, readers, and texts. Borges' 1943 short story 'Funes el memorioso' ('Funes the Memorious'), for example, echoes aspects of his criticism of the texts of James Joyce –

becoming a creative literary facet of Borges' critical response to a precursor.[5] Identifying critical commentary or analysis in fiction raises questions of voice and authority, as narrative voice and characterisation arguably preclude direct statement. The difficulties of attempting to attribute critical authority to the words of a work of fiction, in the way that we might a work of criticism, is played with by J. M. Coetzee in 1999's *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*. Coetzee's novel manipulates a slipperiness of voice between author, narrator, and character; following fictional author of fiction Costello as she delivers lectures, seminars, and speeches around the world, which are peppered with versions of texts previously published by Coetzee under his own name (detailed in the Acknowledgements at the close of the work). Costello's words, such as her comments on realism in Lesson 1 – 'There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe that when the text said, "On the table stood a glass of water," there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them' – provoke through their literary context a reappraisal of how we ordinarily attribute authority in critical authorial voices.[6] Such ambiguities are borrowed by creative forms of critical writing too: for example in Borges' 1960 essay 'Borges y Yo' ('Borges and I') and Walter Benjamin's 1928 work *Einbahnstraße* (*One Way Street*) devices more associated with literature, such as paradox and an unreliable narrative voice, work towards a mode of criticism which resists being reduced to a fixed argument.

While more traditional literary critical forms – the essay, article, chapter, or monograph – are challenged by an approach like that of Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, the conventions, attitudes, presumptions, aims, and figures of literary criticism have faced their most significant critique from critical theory – which relies for the most part upon the same approved forms of publication. Determined by the scope of the endeavour rather than its content or aims, the extended written peer-reviewed piece dominates literary critical output. Yet even within its conventional form critical theory interrogates the habits of literary criticism; just one early example that remains significant is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 study *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, which uses a feminist theoretical approach to question both literature and literary criticism. Literary theoretical approaches examine areas of critical activity from the determination of a text's meaning to the ethical and political implications of literature and criticism. The impact of 'Theory' upon academic criticism is beyond the scope of this introduction; however we can see also its impact upon online criticism which is linked to, yet outside, the academy. Online literary magazines offer contemporary literary criticism with a faster submission-to-

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[5] For the most thorough and recent discussion of Borges' literary and critical relationship with Joyce, see Patricia Novillo-Corvalán, *Borges and Joyce: An Infinite Conversation* (London: Legenda, 2011).

[6] J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2003), p. 19. As the Acknowledgements details, 'An earlier version of Lesson 1 appeared under the title 'What is Realism?' in *Salmagundi* nos. 114-15 (1997)' (Coetzee, p. 233).

publication rate than their academic counterparts; several have a specific focus on, or create a space for, new and current theoretical writing. Though outside academia, both their output and aims are informed by critical theory – as arguably are an ever-growing number of online magazines and blogs offering academically-informed commentary and analysis of culture and the arts. These online endeavours use critical and analytic tools and have an immediate availability, posting articles which are as capable of referencing Gilbert and Gubar as they are another blog. They also provide a space in which groups and approaches that are underrepresented in the academy can gain exposure and recognition. Such writing embraces open access and freedom of knowledge, thus setting these articles at an even further remove from much of online academic publishing. While a vast number of established and new academic journals are now available online and there has been an increase in the publishing of critical monographs and edited volumes as e-books, there are still debates around open access and its attendant navigations of copyright, permissions, and licensing. While popular sites such as JSTOR and Project MUSE offer wide access to those affiliated to an institution, readers with no affiliation still face subscription fees and not all journals place their most recent issues on such websites. Open access publishers such as the Open Humanities Press in part ask for the theoretical encounters of academic criticism to be brought to bear upon our usual modes of publication, but face resistance. Yet such organisations signal a continued period of significant change in how academic criticism is distributed.

Reviews of recent critical works are published in both literary magazines and academic journals of literary criticism– a mode of peer to peer critical writing. Literary reviews, in newspapers and magazines on and offline, arguably also fall under the umbrella of criticism. Depending on the publication in which they appear, reviews reach varying degrees of both academic and popular readerships; indeed as newspaper websites and apps are increasingly well-integrated as parts of our online lives their book reviews can reach us with ease. Such reviews also enjoy a second life in the comments sections with which much of online opinion journalism is now endowed, as the text under review and the review itself are critiqued by readers. Reviews and their comments sections perhaps function primarily as criticism boiled down to judgement – but still can be read as acts of criticism. Journalistic reviews and the reactions they provoke both report and shape the reception of literary texts, a role the press performs again in a further activity of critical judgement: the literary prize. This role varies from direct involvement such as the *New Statesman*'s affiliation with the Goldsmiths Prize to the coverage afforded to nominees and winners of the Man Booker, Prix Goncourt, and Nobel prizes. National and international literary prizes can be read as a form of literary criticism: acts of informed judgement (typically involving academic critics) which have a significant impact on the

afterlife of a literary text. Perhaps more unusual is the reading of social media activity as comprising forms of arts and cultural criticism, including literary. We can read the posting, 'liking', retweeting or sharing of reviews and articles as itself a style of review, and comments sections and Twitter as allowing any reader to turn critic. The aforementioned academically-informed posts and articles analysing culture and literature come equipped with quick links enabling them to be shared on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr etcetera in a single click. We can instantly cast judgement, share texts, add a comment or analysis. It is even possible to engage with popular authors directly: we can look for example at J. K. Rowling's interactions with her fans-turned-critics on Twitter. Rowling's comments on her own texts, in an entertaining re-enactment of opposing literary-theoretical approaches, are retweeted as authoritative statements or vehemently and publicly disagreed with. Our ability to engage immediately and directly with authors of literature, criticism, and theory is worth consideration as part of how online life affects literary criticism, provoking questions of authorial authority, responsibility, and interpretation.

Such questions argue for the relevance of considering social media within a discussion of criticism, as does the manner in which social media can overcome constraints of limited readership or elitism. We can read a confirmation of the increased relevance of social media within the humanities in updates to the MHRA Style Guide, which now includes a section on referencing from blogs to Twitter and Facebook. Such an update responds to the demands of a community: a community which now has access to specifically academic social media sites such as Academia.edu which uses interfaces familiar to social media users to allow academics to follow each other, share their articles, and set up a profile page. A community is essential to criticism, and literary criticism draws from and informs multiple communities at once: groups formed around a specific text, author, genre, period, approach, or around how such groups intersect. Criticism responds to an ongoing community of critics and critical texts, a presumed or hypothetical readership and notional canon. The developments afforded by work in online publishing and Digital Humanities challenge norms but emphasise community.

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Whilst the coffeehouses' accommodation and encouragement of such sociability through a mingling of the classes was paramount to their cultural success, it was also the reason that they were viewed with suspicion by courtly government officials.
Sean Whitfield

Just as the field of Digital Humanities has fostered and continues to develop a community, which enables, produces, and shares criticism, Sean Whitfield (Oxford Brookes University) opens our

volume with his examination of a much earlier community of critics frequenting the seventeenth century London coffeehouses. He explores here the figure of John Dryden (1631-1700), renowned for the criticism he advanced in his favoured Will's Coffee House, Russell Street. As well as elucidating the popularity of these new environments of criticism, which he describes as places that 'bred and fed critical opinion' and 'spaces in which literary discourse could flourish', Whitfield further reveals the critique that such communities of criticism, and especially Dryden, received. He focuses particularly on a poem written by John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, *An Allusion to Horace: The Tenth Satire of the First Book,* and a satirical play, *The Rehearsal,* authored by George Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham, and others. In both works Dryden becomes a figure of ridicule for his supposed sexual inadequacy, arrogance, effeminacy, and low class. Introducing us to these examples of critiques of criticism, Whitfield in turn critiques the reactions of Rochester and Buckingham to Dryden's criticism (personified in the figure of the man himself), addressing the hidden reasons behind such mockery. Amongst other possible motives, Whitfield particularly uncovers here the role of personal agenda in such criticism: indicating the wish on the part of the aristocracy to defend the established norms of libertinism in the face of this new, 'emerging literary bourgeois'.

> *… by promoting the works of his generation, Waugh not only promoted himself but, more significantly, fashioned a new modernism with a focus on exteriority against the grain, or Zeitgeist, of high modernism.*
> Yuexi Liu

This concept of the critic's agenda is moreover developed in our second contribution by Yuexi Liu (University of Durham), which, transporting attention to the twentieth century, explores the criticism penned by Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966). Whilst Waugh's contribution to the field of criticism has been neglected in favour of his novels, Liu seeks to shed light on both this important aspect of his career and, of note for our critique of criticism, on another critical medium: the review. Criticising the so-called high modernists, amongst whom were Eliot, Joyce, and Woolf, for belonging to an older generation, Waugh promoted his own modernism, which Liu terms an 'exterior modernism'. In this he afforded emphasis to cinematic elements such as dialogue, whilst rejecting the otherwise popular inclusion of psychoanalysis. Such a form of modernism is not, however, evident in Waugh's early novels, but is discussed and developed in his reviews, especially those of the works of Graham Greene, Henry Green, and Wyndham Lewis. As such, Liu reveals and explores Waugh's use of his reviews as a platform to pronounce, and decipher for himself, the modernism that he believed to be truly modern: propaganda for his beliefs, which, in turn, informed his own later novels. Thus, just as

class-warfare constituted a motive behind the criticism against Dryden, Liu exposes the generational tension at play in Waugh's reviews, evincing, like Whitfield, the exploitation of criticism for personal agenda.

The cognition of the world is an embodied process, determined by the immersion of the body-mind continuum into the environment [...] In the practice of the essay, understanding the world is a productive and creative activity, with knowledge thus resulting from the dynamic and processual relationship linking the subject of the act of knowledge to the object.
Paolo Gervasi

Yet, according to Paolo Gervasi (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa), in any act of criticism a certain element of personality is unavoidable, due to our 'embodied comprehension' of the world. Gervasi's article addresses a further form of criticism: the essay, which he introduces as a 'hybrid genre' that allows a combination of 'the logic-argumentative faculties of critical writing' and 'the imaginative faculties of literary writing'. This concept was developed by the focus of Gervasi's investigation, Cesare Garboli (1928-2004), another twentieth-century writer and critic who identifies this blend as one of 'pesanteur' and 'grâce' respectively. With these two elements in mind, Gervasi further explores the significance Garboli affords to narration, which the latter believed the most effective method in writing an essay as it most closely resembles how our minds make sense of reality. Gervasi – here hinting indeed at a personal aspect to criticism – terms this 'embodied comprehension', as narration is 'a form of understanding that operates through empathy and emotional participation in the states of mind of other people and is activated by an embodied simulation of the narrated events': a simulation individual to all people. Garboli's essays are constructed as novels of ideas, in which he was especially intrigued by the personal connection between writing and the writer's life. Gervasi in fact stretches his concept of 'embodiment' further here, as he accounts for Garboli's notion that many authors, including Elsa Morante and Natalia Ginzburg, transcribe their body-mind experiences into literature. He even reminds us how, in doing so, they are simultaneously affected, as are the critics critiquing their methods, by their – again personal – biological experiences as writers. Thus, whilst shedding light on Garboli's praise of the essay as the most logical medium of criticism, Gervasi presents a very human side to essay-writing in which, subconsciously, both emotions and physiology are central to a critic's work.

...arriving at a decision as to what warrants being the object of intention and representation is described as function of how the individual interpreter acts on her/his 'intuition' as to what matters about the text, whose fields of potential signification are merely augmented by means of a text analysis portal's exploratory 'playspace'.
Jack K. Rasmus-Vorrath

Jack K. Rasmus-Vorrath (University of Oxford) provides us with a fitting article to close our issue by bringing the discussion forward to the latest community of criticism: the Digital Humanities. He also confirms, as evident in the quote above, the individuality of criticism that has been a common theme in all four contributions. Indeed Rasmus-Vorrath delineates here two traditions of literary scholarship, both of which support the role of the interpreter's intuition. The first argues for the employment of technology to enable access to and analysis of source documents, whilst the second, more intrusive theory considers the 'text's critical reception as a self-justifying extension of the original, producing a hybrid document'. Introducing a number of representatives of these views, he employs the 1999 conference held at the University of Virginia by the Association for Computing and Humanities and the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing as a case study: with Allen Renear and Jerome McGann exemplifying the respective beliefs. Yet, having introduced these modern debates, Rasmus-Vorrath looks to compare such developments with earlier thinking in Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche. With the numerous developments in Heidegger's reasoning, he indeed finds here various arguments that could contribute to such debates. This includes confirmation of the primary authority held by the interpretative heritage (*Sein*) over the author-creator (*Dasein),* and furthermore Heidegger's belief, on later reading Nietzsche, that the criteria of critique, whilst still performed by individuals, are determined rather by the needs of the *discussion*, in response to which the criticism first appears. This analysis of nineteenth and twentieth century German philosophy thus raises questions for Digital Humanities now. Should technology simply enable access so that sources can be interpreted freely? Or should more be done to address the role of the interpretative tradition in how a text is understood? Given how current this debate is, Rasmus-Vorrath, through this retrospective analysis of the views of two of the most influential philosophers of the past centuries, asks and leaves such questions open, suitably concluding the issue by inspiring reflection on the future of criticism in the Humanities.

This volume thus explores different communities of critics: from coffeehouses to digital libraries, and investigates various available forms of criticism: including poetry, theatre, reviews, and essays. Examining a range of European literatures – English, Italian, and German – from the seventeenth century to the present day, our four authors simultaneously reveal the multifaceted nature of criticism,

its media, and its aims, as well as its common trends. Indeed, by raising the issue of the fundamental individuality of criticism, all authors engage, amongst many others, with one shared question posed in our initial Call for Papers: 'And if interpretation is the critic's task, then to what extent is criticism creative?' Whilst criticism is often regarded as enjoying a certain objective authority over the piece of literature it has critiqued, these four articles here shed light on the subjective and indeed 'creative' aspects of criticism, which should in turn be analysed. As modern-day academics, with continually increasing access to a wealth of criticism, we must not overlook the need to critique this criticism.