

## The *CounterText* Interview: John Schad

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As was indicated in the editorial to a previous number of *CounterText* (7: 2), John Schad's writings are synonymous with creative criticism and its emergence as a distinct mode of scholarship – and creation. Indeed, it is fair to say that they were significant in deepening and broadening its appeal as a writing practice that makes the boundaries between forms of imagination and critique indistinct, and in helping it acquire profile and recognition. His work draws together, among other elements, life-writing, history and archivism, Victorianist and Modernist scholarship, and poststructuralist influences, while featuring motifs suggestive of mystery and play, contingency and coincidence. As his work explores the extended scope for experiment with form, genre, mode, and voice, creative criticism has, in parallel, itself continued to grow and evolve, making this interview particularly timely.

Q: To begin, what's in a name? You are recognised as a pioneering figure in the emergent movement of 'creative criticism', a literary-critical practice that engages with artworks, texts, and historical figures not just analytically but also imaginatively. This approach blurs the lines between creation and critique, enriching and perhaps deepening the understanding of the subject. However, you have variously characterised your writing as 'critical-creative' (Schad 2012: x), flipping the typical adjective-noun formation, and as instances of 'post-criticism' or 'ficto-criticism' (Schad and Dalmasso: 5). What differences, if any, do these terms signify for you?

A: Names, I guess, quite rightly defeat us, but the name or half-name that most compels me is 'post-criticism', the title of a brilliant essay from 1983 by Gregory Ulmer. It is about Deconstruction and its claim that criticism might yet find itself to be literary. This claim was made, of course, on the grounds that the criticism-literature distinction is a logocentric sleight of hand, analogous to the notion that, say, thought stands apart from language, or philosophy from rhetoric, or reason from metaphor or narrative.

Anyway, what I like about Ulmer's term is that it suggests there is something within criticism that, by a kind of internal necessity, exceeds itself, or break its own bounds. In other words, the term suggests that to talk about reading, or to *really* talk about *really* reading, is so very strange that if we could only attend to that strangeness then criticism will necessarily be drawn into thoughts, locutions, and situations that have all the strangeness of the literary.

I don't think, then, that we may need to invoke the word 'creative' (as in, say, 'creative criticism'), in that the literary is always already buried within the very strange thing that is criticism. This thought is, in fact, hiding in plain sight in the very term '*literary criticism*'. Post-criticism, you might say, is simply literary criticism that allows for the possibility that it may yet turn out to be truly *literary* criticism. In short, we already have a name.

However, if we do ever feel in need of another name, there is always Walter Benjamin's wonderful but largely un-glossed phrase, 'magical criticism' (see Benjamin 1999a: 415). More of that later, perhaps.

Q: That's such an irresistible thought: 'magical criticism'. We'll indeed return to it. Meanwhile (and this possibly connects quite immediately with your thoughts on the significance of the literary hiding in plain sight in criticism, and the option of modes of critique that *unconceal* that quality, so to speak), could you elaborate on your process of weaving together fiction and literary criticism: two forms that are conventionally perceived as being distinct from one another? How do you navigate the balance between the imaginative liberties of fiction and the analytical rigour of criticism?

A: Yes, my writing, though always intended to be a form of criticism, does constantly find itself in situations that are fictional, or at least partly fictional. However, it is my hope, or perhaps my belief, that those situations come into existence by virtue of not so much imaginative liberty as the demands of the text with which I am working.

For instance, *The Late Walter Benjamin* is a novel, or false novel, that concerns a man called O. E. Tal (one of Benjamin's pseudonyms) who in c. 1948 turns up at a council estate near London, an estate newly built for bombed-out working-class Londoners, and where I myself would later grow up. This figure, O. E. Tal, or Mr Tal, as he is known, thinks or seems to think that he is the late Walter Benjamin, and only ever speaks in verbatim quotations from Benjamin. Now, all this is indeed a fiction but it is urged into existence by certain simple facts of Benjamin's life and work. Firstly, Benjamin's estranged wife and son fled Nazi Europe for London in 1939 and urged Benjamin to join them; this he never did, but had he done so and then been bombed-out he might just have ended up on the estate. Secondly, Benjamin's writing is marked by a profound fascination with displacement, the messianic potentiality of the working class, and the deep magic of quotation: 'Citation,' he writes 'wrenches [...the word] destructively from its context, but *precisely thereby calls it back to its origin*' (1999c: 455).

So, yes, *The Late Walter Benjamin* is a fiction, but a fiction that is motivated by both history and text. And this commitment to text is redoubled in that, in terms of process, my initial task was simply to read Benjamin and note down any phrase or line that seemed suggestive of a situation or conversation that might have made some kind of sense on the estate. I then just stared at these notes until such time as an opening scene emerged, and thereafter, at every single moment, both dialogue and narrative were driven by the specific cues given by Mr Tal's Benjaminian citations. In other words, I am always desperately trying *not* to invent or imagine but to attend or infer. I am, then, looking for that which is necessary. My muse (or so I imagine) is Necessity or, at very least, Possibility.

To put all this another way, *The Late Walter Benjamin* is at all times an act of reading, and one that is forever seeking to uncover just some of the spectral encounters, dialogues, and dramas that are to be found half-hidden in Benjamin's writing. What we end with is, then, a novel that is a machine for thinking about, or with, or against, Benjamin – and for doing so in ways of which I myself could only dream.

Q: Looking at work that might be perceived as prefiguring aspects of this kind of critical practice – Derrida's 'Envois' in *The Post Card* or 'Circumfession', say – an inclination towards auto/biography, or what might even be classed as a different mode of autofiction, becomes apparent. This can be seen too in your own work, variously in *Someone Called Derrida: An Oxford Mystery* or *Paris Bride: A Modernist Life* or, of course and as you've already indicated, *The Late Walter Benjamin*, for instance, in which biographical investigation blends, among other elements, with, to put it loosely, 'theory', or 'philosophy', or 'histories' – and more. Could you say a little more about the play between self and voice and mode (if those are even the terms ...)?

A: Helpful here is, I think, Søren Kierkegaard's rhetorical question, 'How does [...] a scholar understand himself as someone who [also] prays?' (Kierkegaard 1996: 207). This we might extend to: how can the *literary critic* understand themselves as someone who also lives, weeps, dies, etc? And *this* we might again extend to: how does *the reader* understand themselves as someone who is also moved or delighted or astonished by what they read – or, indeed, caused to imagine that they are somehow to be found *within* the text?

In this last connection, recall the semi-literate figure of Joe Gargery, the blacksmith in *Great Expectations* who talks of being given 'a good book or newspaper' and how 'when you do come to a J and a O, and says you: "Here, at last, is a J-O, Joe," how interesting reading is!' (Dickens 1965: 76). For Joe, it seems, reading is a case of pursuing a flickering textual trace of himself; it is, if you will, a narcissism of an astonishing kind. And this, I suspect, is close to the heart (if it has one) of reading. If so, then one of the tasks of criticism is to explore where this flickering narcissism might yet take us.

This, though, may well be to find ourselves taken beyond ourselves, to places where I become someone other than myself, or other than I had thought I was, or had liked to think I was.

Take, for example, something I wrote called 'Disastrolgies', and which seems at first to be an essay but then gradually reveals itself to be a dramatic monologue. There is, then, a scholarly 'I' or self at work but it is not myself, or at least not quite. To explain, the text originated in my wanting to write about the curious fact that Derrida and Benjamin share the same birth date (July 15), which led me to look in their writings for references to dates, and this in turn led me to letters or postcards they had written. This then led me to consider who, in either Benjamin's or Derrida's world, might have a very particular way with dates and other people's correspondence. Cue: the man who ran and owned the hotel on the French-Spanish border where Benjamin died in 1940, a man who, it turns out, was known to be 'unreliable with dates' and indeed 'on good terms with [...] the Gestapo.' In my text, then, I allowed my scholarly voice to slowly reveal itself to be the dubious clerkly voice of the hotel owner. In sum, the 'I' at work here turns out to be a dark shadow of my scholarly self, very dark. I turn out to be not only an unreliable narrator but also an unreliable scholar, profoundly unreliable.

Q: To continue with this line about voicings, projections, and their motivations: creative criticism / post-critique is often characterised as being driven, at least in part, by a desire to move beyond the norms of academic criticism. What was the personal or intellectual catalyst that led you to embrace and develop the concept of post-criticism? Can you share a moment or a particular work that marked this shift for you?

A: Yes, the particular catalyst was this: that, back in the 1990s, my father, then in his early 60s, spent the last five or six years of his life mysteriously trapped inside a round-the-clock nightmare in which he imagined he was in the middle of the most appalling constellation of childhood events. My mother transcribed much of his nightmare ramblings and then, after his death, handed to me a wholly unreadable text. I felt, though, that I needed to somehow engage with this text, and so looked for another text through which I could read it. This took me to Derrida's wonderful 1980 text 'Envois', in *The Post Card*, which I had already begun to misread as being (absurdly) all about me thinking of my father.

There were four particular reasons for this misreading: firstly, both Derrida and my father were born in 1930; secondly, 'Envois' is also madly confessional, at times nightmarish and touches on childhood trauma; thirdly, my father had studied at Oxford and much of

‘Envois’ is about strange experiences at Oxford; and finally, Derrida’s text often suggests that he really is thinking about me, or rather a ‘you’ who I mistake to be me: ‘Suppose,’ he writes, ‘that at the end of reading something, one of the voices of the book murmurs to you [...] I was thinking of you’ (Derrida: 78).

All this ended in *Someone Called Derrida*, a book that necessarily drew me into the frame or picture of the text, and demanded not only close reading, archival work, historical investigation etc but also all the resources to be in found within what might be called dream reading – or, to steal a phrase from Harold Bloom, ‘strong misreading’. I had never written a book like this before but there was no other way to deal with the text before me, a text that was, if you like, a terrible gift.

Q: Can we say something about creative criticism / post-critique and enjoyment? Famously, Michel Foucault described his *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*, sometimes referred to as the only one of his books directly about literature, as the one he enjoyed writing most. That book arguably has a post-critical identity of its own, possibly as a result too of the nature of the writing it discusses. We will ask later on about enjoyment on the readerly side, but can we ask here about the appeal of post-criticism in the writing, and your own personal experience of that?

A: Virginia Woolf once wrote that ‘to write criticism is now like writing with my hand clenched’, and yes, in contrast, there are moments when to write post-criticism feels like writing with my hand *un-clenched* (Woolf 1975–9: volume 4, 21). These are those moments when, in the actual process of first drafting, my writing makes a series of darting and seemingly intuitive moves; these moves are, as-ever, working with quotation and thus still have, I think, interpretive force but they temporarily run ahead of any reasoning act of interpretation on my part. In such moments, I think of Woolf’s wonderful line, ‘Let us commit any blasphemy of laughter and criticism’ (Woolf 1992: 204).

And it is true that in such moments of critical ‘blasphemy’ there is, for myself as the writer, a kind of laughter or pleasure. However, at its strongest, or most valuable, this pleasure is perhaps closer to what Roland Barthes would call bliss (or *jouissance*) rather than pleasure, that it so say an experience or event that does not so much satisfy desire, or expectation, but surprises, exceeds, or even disturbs it.

Key to this sense of surprise are those moments in which one’s writing becomes a *finding* of what is there rather than a *creating* of something that was not previously there. This is often an encounter with that which is stubbornly other than that which I could ever have thought (of) myself. And *that*, like Barthes’s *jouissance*, can indeed be disturbing because just at the very moment when I, the writer, was anticipating a sense of achievement at my ‘wonderfully’ intuitive flight, I find instead that I am brought up against the hopeless limits of myself.

Q: **There is something in what you say there that brings to mind contrary and complementary senses of vigil(ance) and voiding, affirmation and insufficiency – and of bearing witness;** to draw upon a word used to such important effect by Gerald Graff and John Guillory, creative criticism / post-critique carries its own distinct character and urgency in *professing* literature and criticism. **What, in your view and to continue your thoughts on this line,** is it that creative criticism / post-criticism might be singularly well placed to profess?

A: To quote St Paul, ‘we preach not ourselves’ (Corinthians II.4.5); and, whatever *we* do, I suspect we should *not* profess ourselves. Instead, we should perhaps profess that with which we seem to have been entrusted – namely, this strange thing that is the literary. And to profess this strange thing may well not be to curate it, or critique it, or comment upon it, but rather to have faith in it. As John Guillory reminds us, at times in history a ‘professor’ is one who professes faith.

And to have faith *in a text* may well mean a mode of criticism in which we take part in the text, or even vanish into it. I am now back to Ulmer, this time to his brilliant suggestion that ‘post-criticism constitutes a break with mimesis and the values and assumptions of realism’ (Ulmer 1983: 83). This is to suggest, I think, that we might not stand outside of the text and hold a mirror up to it, but rather find (or indeed lose) ourselves on the inside of it.

By the way, the word *profession* has an etymological link to *speaking*, and near the end of her life Woolf remarks that ‘I can’t write criticism, only talk it’, as if to say that criticism is more nearly itself when the critic is not writing but speaking (Woolf 1975–9: volume 6, 384). If so, then perhaps we should profess *speech* -- that is to say, the live, intimate, inter-subjective drama that is the event of speaking *to someone*. And this, of course, begs the question of not so much the ‘I’ of criticism but rather the ‘you.’ In short, who is the whom of criticism?

Interesting in this connection is Ross Wilson’s wonderful new book *Critical Forms* with its attention, inter alia, to the hidden role that the university lecture has played in the history of literary criticism. This relates, of course, to the role of performance within criticism, which reminds me of a remark made in 1936 by Woolf’s nephew Julian Bell when working as a Professor of English Literature in China – ‘I’ve had to grow,’ he said, ‘a whole new literary character in the process of improvising my lectures’ (Bell: 47)

As it happens, within a few months, Bell quite literally became someone else when he abandoned lecturing to serve, and indeed die, as an ambulance driver in the Spanish Civil War.. So, to return to Kierkegaard: how does the scholar understand himself as someone who also drives an ambulance? Criticism may, at times, so exceed itself as to leave the building altogether. Anarchists talk of ‘propaganda by the deed’ – might there also be *criticism* by the deed?

Q. Well, your own *criticism by the deed* – this is a rich phrase – becomes pertinent here. The Department of English Literature and Creative Writing at Lancaster has, in recent years, and it seems largely thanks to your influence, emerged as a hub of creative critical writing in the UK. What are the challenges of teaching creative criticism? Does it come with its own distinct sense of discipline, in more than one sense of this term? How do you approach the challenge of guiding students to find their own voice within this unorthodox framework? What pedagogical methods do you find most effective in fostering creativity without losing critical depth?

A: Yes, there is *quite a lot of it about* here at Lancaster, with several wonderful colleagues doing many wonderful things, and many wonderful students doing many wonderful things.

As for pedagogy – well, in some ways, we just give a couple of lectures and then off the students go. I do, though, teach a Master’s course called ‘Fusions’ where we self-consciously focus on texts that are so strange as to *demand* from us acts of reading that are themselves strange. We currently focus on work by such as Benjamin, Loy, Mirrlees, Woolf, Beckett, Celan, and Derrida. Broadly speaking, these are, of course, modernist authors, and so we keep a close eye on Ulmer’s brilliant claim that post-criticism’s break with

realism is analogous to modernism's break with realism. If true, regular criticism might be considered (for better or worse) a form of nineteenth-century realism.

To return, though, to method. Well, I guess it's more trick than method; nevertheless, there are two or three things I might say.

Firstly, I often suggest that students simply begin an essay normally enough but then allow the first person to enter and indeed to develop until this 'I' may be speaking or writing from a very particular place or time, and thus to gradually emerge into what one might call a character. In short, the suggestion is: do not so much find your voice as *throw* your voice.

Secondly, I sometimes suggest that students simply look for ways in which a text turns up where it doesn't seem to belong, and then to develop from there. One example we work with is one of the very first performances of Beckett's *Godot* in England which, took place in June 1956, for reasons unknown, to an audience of pensioners in the Grand Theatre at the northern working-class seaside resort of Blackpool. A little research reveals that most of the pensioners, expecting a comedy, left way before the end, thus being blessed to wander Blackpool forever under the blissful assumption that Mr Godot does indeed turn up.

Thirdly, in terms of assessment, we tend to say that however 'creative' a student's work it must be *an act of reading*. This tends simply to mean quotation, though not as we know it – often taking the form of, say, impersonation or play of voices. Sometimes indeed, the trick is excessive quotation, thus pursuing Benjamin's dream of 'a criticism consisting entirely of quotations' (Benjamin 1999d: 291).

**Q. It would be curious to witness what, institutionally and beyond the seminar room, would be made of that dream coming closer to reality / realisation.** Considering the evolving landscape of literary criticism, what do you perceive as the most significant challenges and opportunities facing scholars who wish to engage in post-critical literary scholarship? How do you see this field evolving?

A: I guess the most obvious challenge to post-criticism is quite simply the fact that, to my knowledge, there is, as yet, no major print journal explicitly devoted to this mode of scholarship, and very few academic presses have really opened their doors to it. However, things are changing: some established journals do now accept such work (here *CounterText* is in the lead) and among the newer e-journals there is the excellent *Project Passage* in Belgium, whilst at Lancaster we have both *Lune* (run by colleagues) and *Errant* (run by postgraduates).

As for how I see the field evolving – well, I guess the most obvious thought is that gradually it will become just one more species of recognised academic literary criticism, and that we will cease to see conferences specifically devoted to creative criticism but rather that it's simply to be found alongside all the other methods and madneses to be encountered at regular conferences.

**Q: In the context of *CounterText* and the like-minded spaces you mention, all deeply concerned with the edges of what can be considered literature, how do you view the role of creative criticism and post-criticism in expanding or redefining literature's boundaries? How does creative criticism challenge or contribute to the ongoing discourse on what constitutes the 'literary' in the 21st century?**

A: I think it alerts us to the possibility that our engagement with literature, not only in the moment of reading but also of criticism, is not so much a case of subject meets object but

something much more inter-subjective. Helpful here may be Marcello's famous words to Horatio regarding the Ghost of Hamlet's father – namely: 'Thou art a Scholler, speake to it...' As Derrida suggests, this line prompts the thought that as literary scholars we might not only speak *about* ghosts – most obviously, authors that are dead – but also *to* them. If so, then they might just speak back. And one strength of post-criticism is that it offers ways in which this dialogue between scholar and spectre might actually be dramatised or even realised.

So, to return to your question, post-criticism might suggest that the literary is marked by an otherness that is radically inter-subjective, which is to say an otherness that may perhaps be best understood through theological thought. Interesting here is George Steiner's remark that, when it comes to the literary, we tend to read 'as if the singular presence of the life of meaning in the text [...] was "a real presence"' (Steiner: 440). Steiner, though Jewish, here glances toward the Catholic doctrine of the real presence of the body of Christ in the bread that is broken in the Eucharist. If Steiner is right to do so then the literary is potentially an encounter with grace, a grace that is never simply for me but always already also for others, not least those who are themselves as broken as the bread.

Talking of grace, or at least that which may surprise us, post-criticism also alerts us to how the literary might have within itself the capacity to know the unknown. Helpful here is André Breton's stunning Surrealist declaration that 'words are the bait I set for the unknown', as if to suggest that words somehow draw to themselves knowledges to which we ourselves otherwise would not have access (Breton 1970: 13). This is echoed in Benjamin's claim that the very first acts of reading in human history were readings of the stars, an activity that then became the basis for clairvoyance, meaning that 'it is to script and language that clairvoyance has, over the course of history, yielded its [...] powers' (Benjamin 1999b: 697).

If Breton and Benjamin are to be believed, literary knowledge would not simply entail what may be known *about* literature but also *what literature itself knows* – not least, what literature knows about those who are lost to us. Cue a famous line from Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*: 'Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street' (Woolf 1992a: 167). This prompts the thought that we might just read *Mrs Dalloway* specifically in order to tap into these affinities, and in so doing come to know something we might otherwise never know about, say, a very particular woman in the street, in West London, on June 13, 1923. To put that another way, might we find in *Mrs Dalloway* the resources to read that woman back into existence? It's what I attempt in *Paris Bride*.

**Q: There are various notes in what you say there that recall the centrality of modernism and poststructuralist thought in your work. If we may run a little further with this theme:** your work in creative criticism seems to be a nuanced response to poststructuralist thought, particularly the ideas of Derrida and Barthes about the nature of textuality and authorship. In what ways do you see creative criticism as a continuation, divergence, or critique of post-structuralist ideas, specifically in terms of the fluidity of text and the role of the author?

A: Yes, there are undoubtedly continuities with Derrida and Barthes, particularly in their insistence on how meaning is always already elsewhere, forever eluding our grasp however hard we pursue it. Nevertheless, within classical poststructuralism there is, perhaps, limited recognition or realisation of the sheer drama or pathos of this pursuit, simply because the insistence on the ceaseless movement of meaning makes it difficult for the scene of meaning to ever be paused long enough for us to realise the pathos of it all.

If, though, we turn to Benjamin we do find something very much like this stilling of the frame. I have in mind these astonishing lines:

Again and again, in Shakespeare [...], kings, princes, attendants, and followers 'enter fleeing'. [...] Their entry into the visual field of nonparticipating [...] persons [thereby] allows the harassed to draw breath. (Benjamin 1996b: 484)

This pausing, or drawing of breath is, I think, precisely what is made possible by post-criticism's determination to realise the pathos implicit in the ceaseless movement or 'fleeing' of meaning.

It is, of course, no accident that Benjamin freezes the frame at the point at which actors encounter their audience, an audience who necessarily exist outside the drama, and thus in some sense stand for the extra-textual world. For Benjamin sees, I think, the dramatic, or even melodramatic, freeze-framing of meaning as making possible a raw, unmediated encounter between text and history. And it is for this reason that post-criticism is more open to history than is classical poststructuralism. Indeed, it is particularly open, as the Benjamin lines might suggest, to the very particular history that is the history of a text's reception, a history that can at times be not only odd but brutal, even bloody.

See, perhaps, 'Queerest Book', a dramatic monologue that arises out of my being struck by the simple historical fact that Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems were not published until 1918, despite them passing to the poet Robert Bridges immediately upon Hopkins's death in 1889. Why then, after nearly thirty years, did Bridges finally decide to publish the poems? Why in 1918? Well, there is an almost completely overlooked letter that Bridges wrote in September 1917 where he says he has been urged to finally publish the poems by 'a man who had just come from Petrograd.' Bridges offers no more explanation as to who the man is, which prompted me to explore who in the Oxford of 1917 would have known both Bridges and the work of Hopkins, and been to Petrograd. This finally led me to the altogether factual scene of a very particular Professor of Russian committing suicide in a bath in Oxford in 1929.

By the way, I guess we can see in all this not just a debt to 1980s poststructuralism but also 1990s New Historicism, with its commitment to both the textuality of history and the historicity of the text, a commitment which insists that, however much meaning might differ and defer, we may still find ourselves colliding into fact and flesh.

Q: It seems apt in that regard to say something **too** about performance. We can ourselves confirm, from having attended one or two of your own readings of your creative-critical work, that there can be a performed element to creative criticism / post-criticism that is arresting and absorbing. You have also adapted some of your writing for radio and for the stage. In what ways is performance, and adaptation, integral to the project of your writing?

A: I guess performance is often inherent in my work in the sense that I am rarely reading or writing as myself but, instead, turning into someone else (e.g. 'Disastrologies') and/or finding a fictional situation within which to do 'my' reading, quoting, and thinking (e.g. *The Late Walter Benjamin*).

I suspect, though, that there is something deeply buried within literary criticism that is necessarily theatrical or performance. This, I guess, *must* be the case insofar as criticism is a form of theory, for, as we know, the word 'theory' is etymologically related to the word 'theatre'.

We can see something of all this in Derrida's work, particularly on those rare occasions when his writing momentarily breaks into dialogue. These moments relate, I think, to his early insistence that there should never be a 'forgetting of the stage' (Derrida 1978:



236). Also important here is his early work on the plays of Antonin Artaud, in which Derrida sees a ‘theatrical unintelligibility in the night that precedes the book’ (Derrida 1978: 189). It is, then, as if before ever there was writing or reading there was theatre. If so, criticism must in some sense always participate in theatre.

This, though, is not to say that the world should necessarily pay any particular attention to what we do as literary critics; and it certainly doesn’t mean the world should be expected to turn and observe us, or admire us. In fact, it probably means quite the reverse: namely, that *we* are the ones who should pay attention, and we are to pay attention to the fact that our humble acts of criticism – as long as they *are* humble – participate in that vast drama or theatre which is the very theatre of meaning. This is not, of course, a theatre we shall ever quite understand, and in that respect is a kind of ‘theatrical unintelligibility in the night’. Whether the best name for this theatre is tragedy or comedy only eternity will tell. So, back to the text, the eternities of the text.

**Q. On this side of eternity there must always be politics.** In what ways, if any, do you see creative criticism and post-criticism as inherently political practices? For instance, in your approach to blending narrative and critique, how do you engage with and reflect upon contemporary political issues?

A: I guess the politics of this mode of reading and writing may be rather ambiguous, or complex, or even dangerous. In the first instance, this is because it allows for the figure of the unreliable scholar – as, say, in ‘Disastrologies’ where the scholarly ‘I’, for all his knowledge and persuasive interpretive insights, may well have no moral authority whatsoever. Such a mode of writing makes political or moral criticism difficult since we would normally think that such criticism was grounded in the critic’s own reliability, or integrity.

If we pushed this a little further, we might even say that *any* attempt at political literary criticism, even the most conventional, is undermined by post-criticism insofar as it suggests that *every* critical voice is to some extent performed and thus unreliable.

Anything like this would, of course, be very much at odds with the contemporary academy which so often claims to be *making the world a better place*, as if to say that the scholar not only knows what is better but can also speak of what is better. The trouble with all this for literary scholars is that, as Stéphane Mallarmé remarks, ‘Reading [is] a desperate practice’ – and so too is criticism, particularly if we take seriously its etymological connection to ‘crisis’ (Mallarmé: 186)

Literary criticism may, that is, call us *not* to speak out for what we think is better, but to listen out for what is better than we think. Our vocation may, then, be other than political, or at least other than political as conventionally understood. Indeed, it may in some ways be closer to the religious. To put that another way, literary criticism is not so much a case of *us* working on the world as of the world working on us. To cite Benjamin citing Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Everything that one can think itself thinks’ (Benjamin 1996a: 145).

**Q: Finally, can we return to that tantalising phrase from earlier: ‘magical criticism’? Any further thoughts on that, by way of conclusion?**

Well, the phrase, which is Benjamin’s, is to be found in an unpublished fragment, and appears as follows:

Magical [*magische*] criticism [is ...] a manifestation of the highest stage [*Stufe*] of criticism. Opposite [but] on the same plane [*Stufe*] is the scholarly literary-historical treatise.

These are difficult lines, but they seem, I think, to suggest that magical criticism is both like and unlike philological or historical criticism; as if to say that we are dealing with history but not as we know it, or could ever know it. This would make sense of the suggestion, later in the same fragment, that magical criticism does *not* get 'to the bottom of mystery [*Geheimnis*].' Putting all this together, magical criticism would perhaps be criticism that engages with history as mystery.

If so, we might say that we are, above all, to read historically, but that to do so is not so much *the end* of our interpretive problems as only *the very beginning*. However, given that, for Benjamin, the mystery that is history is somehow shot through with hints of 'redemption [*Erlösung*]' (Benjamin, 1999e: 390), these problems are, ultimately, good problems, or rather the problems of the good.

In sum, magical criticism would, I guess, be criticism that is made magical by virtue of the magic that is history.

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