



This is a repository copy of *Harold Schweizer, On Lingering and Literature*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/186380/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

O'Key, D. (2022) Harold Schweizer, On Lingering and Literature. *Comparative Critical Studies*, 19 (1). pp. 108-111. ISSN 1744-1854

<https://doi.org/10.3366/ccs.2022.0433>

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Edinburgh University Press in *Comparative Critical Studies*. The Version of Record is available online at:
<https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/ccs.2022.0433>.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Harold Schweizer, *On Linging and Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021). 136 pp., ISBN 9780367740375, £35.99 hardback, ebook £13.59.

Linging. Dawdling. Idling. Loafing. Lolling about. *Verweilen* in German. *Attente* in French. It's hard to truly say what these things are, what they constitute, Harold Schweizer writes at the outset of *On Linging and Literature*. Linging, like its fellow languid synonyms, is conceptually indeterminate: neither industrious nor totally unproductive, it isn't a feeling of pure captivation but nor is it one of entire absent-mindedness. Linging is certainly not energetic, but nor is it completely torpid. It is, Schweizer tells us, a *something* that is also, curiously, a *nothing*. For him, lingering is an everyday experience of temporary nothingness. As 'a little time that is a lot' (p. 1), lingering is one of the things we do when, just for a moment, we do nothing at all.

And it is this moment of freedom, these fragile and fleeting 'happy hours of lingering' (p. x), that Schweizer yearns for in this short book of contemplative literary criticism on the phenomenon of lingering. 'This book begins in my childhood, in my enchanted lingering on the granite steps of our small front yard' (p. viii), Schweizer says in the opening sentence. Later he will ask: 'Who has not as a child dillydallied in bed or in the sandpile when one should have eaten one's breakfast or cleaned one's room?' (p. 9). Wistful, then, in its many reflections on a charmed childhood now long gone, *On Linging and Literature* is an autumnal work that longs for the spring.

But Schweizer's nostalgia is not uncritical, for this is a work which desires, above all, to put an end to – to be loose of – the culture of speed and productivity that has underpinned the development of capitalism over the past few centuries. Schweizer, a retired professor of literature at Bucknell, has perhaps acquired a taste for deceleration, for the life lived outside of wage labour and what he calls – following the work of Byung Hul-Chan and others – the 'officially sanctioned linear temporality' (p. 11), which warps our experience of duration to fit around the working day. And so the book we read, the book we linger over as we turn its pages, is one which makes the case for lingering in a world dominated by waiting and rushing: 'It takes guts to stroll or to loaf when the world expects us to hustle' (p. 78).

That *On Linging and Literature* is the work of a Professor Emeritus is almost unmistakable. Schweizer turns to a confidently eclectic – yet still conspicuously canonical – number of literary interlocutors: its go-to authors are Milton, Wordsworth and Woolf. Although Schweizer makes some hand-waving signals about his contribution to current debates on the culture of speed and the humanities as a practice of slowness (briefly invoking the work of Carl Honoré, Michelle Boulous Walker, and Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber), he is in truth singularly preoccupied with treading his own path. This is a path Schweizer established a decade ago in a previous book, *On Waiting*, published by Routledge in 2008. There, he thought of waiting as a question of power, as something that is mostly forced upon us. When we are made to wait, Schweizer says, 'we fidget, we pace, we complain, we consult our watches' (*On Waiting*, p. 18). And yet there is hope: if we were to 'claim our experience of waiting rather than being merely subjected to it', he concludes, 'we resist the commercialization of time, we own our time, we make time matter – we matter' (*On Waiting*, p. 128).

Although waiting and lingering are both suspended temporalities, lingering emerges in this new book as the temporality of waiting which, by reclaiming the experience of waiting, redeems it. Linging opposes the demands of productive time. Schweizer thus differentiates the two categories from one another: where waiting is anticipatory, lingering idles in the now. Where waiting is bound by its endpoints (the things we are

made to wait for), lingering has 'porous temporal borders' (p. 7). Put simply, waiting is an economics; lingering is an aesthetics. For Schweizer, it is T. S. Eliot's Prufrock who embodies this distinction: 'Homeless in time, Prufrock cannot make his home in duration' (p. 24). Fidgeting and fussing, measuring his life in coffee spoons, Prufrock is a waiter, not a lingerer.

It is through the work of close reading that Schweizer teases out Prufrock's role as a peculiarly thwarted lingerer, uncannily alienated from life itself and hence the freedom of idling. In these pages close reading even becomes reconfigured as an analytics of lingering: the more we linger over the particularities of a given text the more we uncover its meanings and forms. 'Literary readings should be done lingeringly – not waitingly' (p. 32), Schweizer argues. Thus lingering is not just the content of this book but also its method, as Schweizer demonstrates in later chapters in which he conducts incisive readings of Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Moose' and 'The Fish', Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Marcel Proust's *Recherche*, and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*.

Yet still, despite Schweizer's stated focus on close reading as lingering, I wish he had lingered a little while longer over the existing literary criticism on these texts. In his chapter on Sebald, for instance, Schweizer ignores many of the most illuminating works of German-language scholarship; he sidesteps entirely the English-language criticism. Perhaps if had engaged with some of these works he would have ended up tempering his claim that Sebald's narrators are 'neither nostalgic nor sentimental' (p. 93) – this is a point that at best simplifies or at worst misreads the dialectical tensions between *Heimweh* and critical solace that animate Sebald's literary project.

Schweizer sets lingering in opposition to today's prevailing 'institutional modes of reading and teaching predicated on speed, efficiency, closure, knowledge, mastery' (p. 38). He also pits lingering against what he calls New Criticism's fetishization of aesthetic experience. Does lingering, then, as an analytic of close reading, also stand in opposition to emerging methods of scholarship like surface reading and world-literary criticism? And what is the relationship between Schweizer's sense of close reading and the contested yet increasingly popular practices of postcritique? Schweizer never says. Instead, he articulates a minor jeremiad: 'everything in our age of haste seems to be opposed to slowness and thus to literature and thus to a humanistic education – and thus to beauty and gratitude' (p. 38). *On Lingering and Literature* is morally persuasive, but it forgoes the task of building on our current conjuncture of criticism.

Even so, the upshot of Schweizer's rejection of haste is his development of lingering as an aesthetics and an ethics. His aim across the book? To interrogate moments of lingering in literary works in order to 'discover the hope and insight, the aesthetic and ethical dimensions, harbored in such a temporality' (p. 2). On the one side, then, lingering is conjured as an aesthetics. For Schweizer it becomes a kind of Kantian *purposeless purpose*, an experience of slow creativity and play. And Schweizer, like the poets he analyses, often looks to nature for the source of this non-instrumental, uncommodified purposeless purpose. When Ralph Waldo Emerson lies down against the side of a tree, when Walt Whitman loafs in the grass, when William Wordsworth sits on an old grey stone, when Samuel Taylor Coleridge rests under a lime-tree bower, when Robert Frost stops by snowy woods – all of these poetic mediations of aesthetic experiences show us, Schweizer suggests, that the aesthetic itself is often only fully realized when our minds become open to other things in a period of lingering. Slowing down is pleasurable; it cultivates alternative joys.

If lingering is an aesthetics because it opens our eyes to the beautiful, then it is also an ethics because it troubles the instrumentalizing ideologies of capital. Against homo economicus, Schweizer contends that lingering is a mode of resistance. Scenes of

ordinary lingering, replete across literary works, even offer ‘moments of quiet rebellion against the dictates of official time’ (p. 15). ‘To linger, to tarry ... these are ways of liberation’ (p. 18) for Schweizer. *On Lingering and Literature* thus develops the concept of lingering as a humanist ethics that militates against the dehumanizing cost-benefit logic of capital. This articulation of a humanist ethics is often convincing. Yet in making this argument Schweizer ends up privileging the forms of destituent power – of individual subversion, transgression, liminality and openness – that have come under increasing scrutiny by fellow literary critics such as Anna Kornbluh. For characters, authors and their critics lingering may indeed offer a momentary reprieve from the strictures of what Schweizer repeatedly terms our ‘time-is-money culture’ (p. 90). But lingering does not, as far as Schweizer imagines it here, offer any sort of real collective confrontation with capital. How, then, do we harness this shared impulse against speed and instrumentality? How do we turn the lingering of close reading into the organized dawdling of workplace struggle against the neoliberal university?

DOMINIC O’KEY
University of Sheffield