The Individual Reader

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Abstract:

How do we read? For critics, now a few years deep into what has been called “the method wars”, the approaches are numerous, but most of all, are collective. Whether critique or postcritique, or the idiosyncratic in between, what is undeniable about the explosion of methods beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion is that it renders us, critics, in the plural. In his first collection of essays and interviews, *Strong Opinions*, Vladimir Nabokov proclaimed that “a work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me”, but as Zadie Smith despaired in her 2004 essay “Read Better”, “the idea of the ‘individual reader’ [has] gone into terminal decline”. Looking to the contemporary autocritical novel, however, we find plenty of readers resistant to the interpretative habits of professional readers, drawing attention to the limitations of institutional reading and extoling the aesthetic affordances of reading limited to the individual. Rather than rehashing the motivations and sensibilities involved and required by reading critically that the method wars have revived, then, this article submits to the “individual reader” offered by autocritical novels by Rachel Cusk, Ben Lerner, and Valeria Luiselli.

Keywords: contemporary novel; Valeria Luiselli; Rachel Cusk; Ben Lerner; literature and crisis; postcritical turn; autocritique

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The Individual Reader

How do we read? For critics, now a few years deep into what Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski have called “the method wars”, the approaches are numerous, but most of all, are collective.[[1]](#footnote-1) Whether critique or postcritique, or the idiosyncratic in between, what is undeniable about the explosion of methods beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion is that it renders us, critics, in the plural. The question is “how do *we* read?” not “how do *you* read?”, directed away from the discrete singularity of reading to the collective plurality of the institutionally popular and endorsed. In his first collection of essays and interviews, *Strong Opinions*, Vladimir Nabokov proclaimed that “a work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me”, but as Zadie Smith despaired in her 2004 essay “Read Better”, “the idea of the ‘individual reader’ [has] gone into terminal decline”.[[2]](#footnote-2) “In writing schools, in reading groups, in universities, various general reading systems are offered”, she continued, which “are like the instructions that come with furniture at IKEA. All one need do is seek out the flatpack novels that most closely resemble the blueprints already to hand.” This procedural reading seeps out to the cultural objects reading systems enfold, too; in one critic’s terms, literary “criticism is cliché” and, in Smith’s framework, clichéd interpretative systems beget clichéd novels.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The narrator’s publisher in the final installment of Rachel Cusk’s trilogy, *Kudos* (2018), offers us an example of this kind of clichéd reading.[[4]](#footnote-4) Once a salesman working in marketing in the firm, he takes the role of expert reader of the literary market (he had risen to a senior position, saving the company from insolvency by selling an obscene number of books of Sudoku). What publishers want, he tells Cusk’s narrator, Faye, “were those writers who performed well in the market while maintaining a connection to the values of literature; in other words, who wrote books that people could actually enjoy without feeling in the least demeaned by being seen reading them” (48). The buying public, he continues, “dislike being made to feel stupid”, but the cruelty felt in “having to grapple with one antiquated text or another” as they “pass through the education system”, is in fact what enamors them with reading as adults: “if, that is, psychoanalysts are to be believed when they say we are unconsciously drawn to the repetition of painful experiences… a cultural product that reproduced that ambiguous attraction, while making no demands and inflicting no pain in the service of it, was bound to succeed” (49).

Following the events of *Outline* (2014) and *Transit* (2017), Faye is in Europe for a literary festival tour, during which time she is interviewed by a series of blithely pompous journalists (as one noted, “[a] work of art could not, ultimately, be negative: its material existence, its status as an object, could not help but be positive, a gain, an addition to the sum of what was”). But none are more confident of his belief in literary social value than Faye’s publisher. Wisely, he tells her, that “[t]here was… a generalised yearning for the ideal of literature”, but people want “to experience the nuances of literature without the hard work involved in reading” (49). This reverence for how “the act of reading symbolize[s] intelligence”, and its now clichéd “connotations of moral virtue and superiority”, strengthens the role of literature in society, because everybody wants to be intelligent and morally virtuous (48). For him, “see[ing] literature as something fragile that needed defending”—like defending Dante’s *Divine Comedy* against a one-star review proclaiming it as “complete shit” (49)—only presumed weakness. In the hierarchy of cultural products, weakness is death.

To Faye, her publisher’s reading of the marketplace of contemporary literature is naturally “cynical”, but more interestingly, “strikingly indifferent to the concept of justice, whose mysteries, while remaining opaque to us, it had always seemed sensible to me to fear” (50). Offering a model of *just* reading—quite different to the type of just reading where one reads quickly, without pausing to examine, critique, or scrutinize—Faye praises the “terror” inducing “opacity of those mysteries”, “for if the world seemed full of people living evilly without reprisal and living virtuously without reward, the temptation to abandon personal morality might arise in exactly the moment when personal morality is most significant” (50).[[5]](#footnote-5) Setting up the publishing world as the vanguard in the war against anti-literature sentiment, Faye argues that “[j]ustice, in other words, was something you had to honour for its own sake, and whether or not he believed that Dante could look after himself, it seemed to me he ought to defend him at every opportunity.”

What is striking about Cusk’s trilogy is not that it offers opportunities for readers to contest ideas about contemporary literature—its settings are writing workshops, readings, author interviews, literary festivals—but that it systematically and swiftly takes down certain kinds of limited, collectively sanctioned patterns of reading. Though set in literary institutions, institutional reading is forced to make way for the narrator’s individual reading style. To be sure, Faye’s interlocutors are strawmen, whose methods and reasons for reading always must acquiesce to the narrator’s superior aesthetic perspective. At the same time, as a writer and a teacher, Faye holds the trilogy’s line on literary education.

If collective modes of reading critically have exhausted the individual, then we must look to the novel for renewed defenses. Modeling myriad methods of reading, privileging some over others, and performing the work of cultural and literary criticism, are tropes of the autocritical novel. Written by novelist-critics, such as Cusk, these hybrid works offer their own, individualized systems of reading their own pages that complicate and critique institutionalized discourses about reading. Rather than rehashing the motivations and sensibilities involved and required by reading critically that the method wars have revived, then, this article submits to the “individual reader” offered by two further examples of autocritical novels, Ben Lerner’s 2011 novel *Leaving the Atocha Station* and Valeria Luiselli’s 2019 novel *Lost Children Archive*.[[6]](#footnote-6) Not all authors of this kind interpret individual reading as anti-institutional; in Lerner, as we’ll see, the individual reading that the narrator exhibits is deliberately set against institutions, but the mode of reading the novel itself exacts does reinforce strategies commonly found in the university classroom (specifically close reading and quotation). Resisting institutional reading, then, is just one way of figuring the individual reader—as we’ve seen in Cusk already, debates about how texts should be read emerge in discussion throughout novels, but in Luiselli these positions aren’t hinged to institutional factions. By considering their modes of reading so tightly, I don’t mean we ought to attend to the debates about our critical methods with any less vigor. Instead, I want to consider what contemporary novels—specifically those we might consider within the contested genre of autofiction, which has been receiving a growing amount of attention in the last decade—think about when they read other texts and themselves, as they construct a system of reading specifically attuned to how the text wants itself to be read.[[7]](#footnote-7) As thinking forms, contemporary autocritical novels resist the interpretative habits of professional readers by creating their own critical frameworks that operate in negative or relief to collective prescriptions, drawing attention to the limitations of institutional reading and extolling the affective and aesthetic affordances of reading limited to the individual.

TRANSLATING, MISREADING

Trying—but failing—to resist institutional reading is a concern at the heart of Ben Lerner’s debut novel *Leaving Atocha Station*. Early in the novel, Lerner’s narrator Adam Gordon becomes obsessed with a man “los[ing] his shit” in a gallery in Madrid, because he himself “was incapable of having a profound experience of art” (8).[[8]](#footnote-8) Most critics and reviewers have misread this phrase as applying solely to visual art, and as indicative of the novel’s overall aesthetic impulses, without pausing to consider other aesthetic experiences such as reading. In foregrounding his narrator’s inability to have ‘a profound experience of art’, it might appear that Lerner’s novel is critiquing the institution’s inability to produce the soaring affects it once claimed it could. Critics have documented precisely how institutions set up to preserve works of art have inadvertently sapped the capacity for aesthetic transportation.[[9]](#footnote-9) But while Adam Gordon’s denial of profundity seems to be the headline act, what he does experience as profound has been overlooked as just the kind of affective investment in the institution that his provocative statement undermines: “the closest I’d come to having a profound experience of art was probably the experience of this distance”, he says, citing that he “tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose… where the line breaks were replaced with slashes, so that what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility” (8–9). This clarification rejects the affective power of artwork in isolation for the institution of close reading—for what is more institutional than reading poetry quoted in essays?

This is a novel, after all, with a programmatic setting—Adam is the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship, hosted by the vague Foundation, funding a “a long and research-driven poem, whatever that might mean, about the literary response to the Spanish Civil War” (119)—and one that also falls into the category of successful-American-abroad-novel, once common in the early twentieth century. As Merve Emre documents in *Paraliterary* (2017), “what all of these texts had in common was their allegedly faithful replication of discursive events, not only in the form of letters embedded into the novel but also in the word-for-word transcriptions of drawing room conversations, dances, and shopping excursions, replete with their own metacommunicative commentaries.”[[10]](#footnote-10) *Leaving the Atocha Station*’s programmatic sensibilities sit very close to the surface of the novel: it even includes an essay Lerner wrote on the poetry of John Ashbery that had previously been published in a scholarly journal, transplanted into Adam’s thoughts, while a ‘word-for-word’ transcription of a messenger chat with a friend not back home but travelling in another country thus becomes a twenty-first century update of drawing room conversation; simply being an artist abroad turns Adam into an “artist of life”.[[11]](#footnote-11) And by playing self-consciously with the critical structures of its own construction— the profundity of ‘quotation’ suggests a way of reading the images in the novel, for example—Lerner’s novel incorporates its own language for interpretation.

As the narrator of Mary McCarthy’s 1971 coming of age novel *Birds of America* wrote in a letter to his mother, “[b]eing abroad makes you conscious of the whole imitative side of human behavior.”[[12]](#footnote-12) And in Lerner’s rendition of this trope, Adam Gordon imitates precisely the stereotypical behavior an artist might perform while abroad in Europe: daily hash taking, writing poetry in public squares, befriending bohemians, visiting museums, struggling with the language, all fed by deep reserves of creative anxiety spurred on by a sense of failure about what he’s doing there and what he will do when he leaves. The further he progresses through his time on his fellowship, the more his anxiety about the limits of aesthetic power can only be countered by a cocktail of uppers, downers, and weed. Early in the novel, in a long, rambling description, we are told hash produces “a small wave of euphoria”; this affect is mirrored in the prose, which rolls in a ratiocinative motion, syntactically accumulating towards the “rush of what [Adam] considered love” (15). And because it is love that he needs, this addiction becomes a poor coping mechanism to help him perform the social affects of generosity and empathy expected of him by others, primarily at his public readings and appearances and in private conversations with his Spanish friends. Imitation, for Adam, becomes the zero-sum game of addiction spurred on by an anxiety about lack of aesthetic feeling for anything other than quotation.

Even his own reading becomes driven by imitation. In a passage that describes Adam Gordon reading Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) on the train to Granada, Lerner self-consciously echoes the style of Anna reading on the train in *Anna Karenina* (1878). Trying to find a half-remembered scene about a train:

[E]very sentence, regardless of its subject, became mimetic of the action of the train, and the train mimetic of the sentence, and I felt suddenly coeval with its syntax. Because the sentences of Tolstoy, or rather Constance Garnett’s translation of Tolstoy, were in perfect harmony with the motion of the Talgo, real time and the time of prose began to merge, and reading, instead of removing me from the world, intensified my experience of the present. (89)

He tells us this is the “strange experience of reading” (90), which is in fact not that strange. Consider Anna on the train to Moscow, who begins to read an “English novel”:

At first she could not read. For a while the bustle of people moving about disturbed her, and when the train had finally started it was impossible not to listen to the noises; then there was the snow, beating against the window on her left, to which it stuck, and the sight of the guard, who passed through the carriage closely wrapped up and covered with snow on one side; also the conversation about the awful snow-storm which was raging outside distracted her attention. And so it went on and on: the same jolting and knocking, the same beating of the snow on the window-pane, the same rapid changes from steaming heat to cold, and back again to heat, the gleam of the same faces through the semi-darkness, and the same voices—but at last Anna began to read and to follow what she read… Anna read and understood, but it was unpleasant to read, that is to say, to follow the reflection of other people's lives. She was too eager to live herself.[[13]](#footnote-13)

What was distasteful to Anna appears also to be distasteful to Adam Gordon, who prefers texts (read: poetry) that cannot be summarized after reading but instead are localized around the conditions of metareading: “when you read about your reading in the time of your reading” (91). Earlier in the novel, Adam notes how as much as he wanted to read “masterful works of Spanish literature” to teach himself the language (19), but he couldn’t, “in part because I had to look up so many words that I was never able to experience the motion of a sentence; it remained so many particles, never a wave.” Reading poetry, however, this experience is crucially different:

It was much easier for me to read a poem in Spanish than Spanish prose because all the unknowing and hesitation and failure involved in the attempt to experience the poem was familiar, it was what invested any poem with a negative power, its failure to move me moved me, at a little; my inability to grasp or be grasped by the poem in Spanish so resembled my inability to grasp or be grasped by the poem in English that I felt, in this respect, like a native speaker. (20)

Back on the train, Adam identifies how the best Ashbery poems, through his grammar of intimacy—the “‘it’, ‘you’, ‘we’, ‘I’”—invoke this system of reading by helping readers to “attend to [their] attention” (91). Ashbery’s ghostly echo in Lerner’s novel is present right from its very title—*Leaving the Atocha Station* is the title of a poem in Ashbery’s 1962 collection *The Tennis Court Oath*. When asked about the significance of Atocha Station in a 1981 interview with A. Poulin for *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Ashbery claimed that it “was really nothing for me to be leaving this particular railway station,” and that the title “meant nothing to me at the time except that I was in a strange city going somewhere,” conceding that “the dislocated, incoherent fragments of images which make up the movement of the poem are probably like the experience you get from a train pulling out of a station… The dirt, the noises, the sliding away.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

By evoking Ashbery, Lerner enacts several modes of intertextuality at once. The named train station provides a site where the poetic and the political intersect, hinting always to the 2004 Madrid train bombings, an event that occurred some forty years after the poem’s publication. He is also referencing “Ashbery’s own time abroad” in Paris in the early 1960s, through which we might imagine Adam working in the shadow of the work produced by American poets in Europe. But more than the evocation of literary forbears, what Lerner is evoking by narrating the process of reading poetry is a model of reading that eschews the interpretative aftermath. This type of close reading is attached to both the “movement of experience”, and is offered as the only mode of reading the kinds of text that “creat[es] itself.”[[15]](#footnote-15) As collage-inspired novels, both *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*,Lerner’s loose-sequel published in 2014, imagine and self-consciously present themselves in this vein, layering fiction upon nonfiction, poetry upon essay, surpassing the metafictional to compose a method for the virtual artwork, as the narrator tells the reader in *10:04*: “I decided to replace the book I’d proposed with the book you’re reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them” (194). Lerner embeds his own methodology for reading within the novels’ very moments of readerly attention, urging the reader to attend to the suspension of definitive meaning that Adam admires in poetry embedded in prose.

The interpretative language of *Leaving the Atocha Station*—alongside *10:04* and *Atocha*’s loose prequel *The Topeka School,* published in 2019—as well as his interviews, lectures, and essays, together form a distinct body of autocriticism that acts as a corollary to the novels’ own maps for reading. While Lerner is not the only contemporary novelist who engages so actively in the interpretation of his own works, he stands out as the most voluble auto-critic. Of interest to me here are the aesthetic implications of the programmatic history of reading, which Lerner’s body of self-commentary points towards in order to emphasize the artistic value of misreading. The institutionalized nature of literary production in the postwar period, as Mark McGurl argues, has led “to a body of work that it is fair to describe as self-involved even when its interests are patently social and historical” and exposed “every work of serious fiction in this period” to be “on one level, a portrait of the artist.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Appropriating Alfred Appel’s description of Nabokov’s aesthetic of “involution”, he categorizes “the variable tendency to ‘involuted’ self-reference in all of these aesthetic formations as ‘autopoetics.’” Locating postwar writers in the “systematization of writing in the university” he argues that the way “most postwar writers exhibit this autopoetic self-referentiality” references the now common requirement of creative writing students and, subsequently, practitioners to provide a critical supplement alongside the literary work.

While such self-reflexive experimentations with genre and form highlight the ongoing influence of institutional structures on authorial practice, autocriticism also offers a deliberately staged rejection of institutional authority, through description of the author’s idiosyncratic aims and methodologies, or more broadly, their own ways of interpreting the novel now. But what is the critic’s job when dealing with such a novelist’s autocriticism? Turning back to Lerner, it is clear that as hyper-attentive to praxis and poetics as he is, his self-reflexivity has the danger of hindering the critical process if everything appears to be advertent. When asked by Gayle Rogers in an interview in 2013 what view he takes on his self-referentiality, he replied:

I enjoy and am flattered by dialogues like this one. How could I not be grateful for the opportunity to think along with someone like you about the weird books I’ve written? I do worry about getting in the way, that my necessary fictions about my fiction or poetry are going to interfere with or discipline readings of the books themselves. Or that there is something off-putting about an author who keeps saying that he wants the reader to participate in the construction of meaning and then keeps offering readings of his own work. Then there’s the fact that a lot of my writing, for better or for worse, already contains its own critical supplement, already comments on its procedures or investments, so I’m probably risking redundancy in that regard. I sometimes envy writers who refuse to talk about their work, but I ultimately experience that as more theatrical, as more invested in authorial mythology, than just being willing to think “out loud” about what one has done, is doing.[[17]](#footnote-17)

It is no wonder that engaging with auto-criticism as comprehensive and distinctive as Lerner’s might seem problematic, particularly as questions of “redundancy” create anxieties for author and critic alike. But rather than avoiding authorial commitments altogether, it might do to view them as speculative rather than definitive, as conceptual rather than prescriptive pictures of a new form of authorial commitment, participation, and engagement. This seems particularly pertinent when reading Lerner, who locates in literary expression the very nature of its inarticulability. As he notes, “I think the instability and participatory nature of the form is supposed to shift attention from the finished and polished artifact to the process of thinking and feeling in time—to let the struggle to express be expressive.”[[18]](#footnote-18) And it is to these same instabilities that his novels’ affective and formal ‘flickering’ squarely point the reader.

Of course, the struggle to communicate is expressive in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, which is enthusiastic about the aesthetic possibility of misreading when communicating across languages. Never speaking “English with [his translator] Teresa… to preserve the possibility of misspeaking or being misunderstood,” he “hoped she would always translate [his] fragmented Spanish in her head, transforming [his] halting and semicoherent utterances into the most eloquent English she could imagine” (83). The novel, moreover, relies on the practice of translation for its potential for creating plurality, uncertainty, indeterminacy, not only for poetic invention (as he does when ‘translating’ Lorca to write his poems) but because Adam lacks the emotional education to feel in publicly accountable ways. In the first few pages, Adam is punched in the face for inadvertently misunderstanding a story in Spanish (he smiled rather than looked sympathetic), while further into the novel Adam turns such errors into a deliberate game. Interactions with his occasional girlfriend, Isabel, develop into performance art, where his methods of translation turn into models of misreading:

[O]ur conversation largely consisted of my gesturing toward something I was powerless to express, then guessing at whatever referent she guessed at, and gesturing in response to that. In this, my project’s second phase, Isabel assigned profound meaning, assigned a plurality of possible profound meaning, to my fragmentary speech, intuiting from those fragments depths of insight and latent eloquence, and because she projected what she thought she discovered, she experienced, I like to think, an intense affinity for the workings of my mind. (46)

Adam’s insistence that he finds it “difficult to express [him]self with subtlety in Spanish” (111) is consistently countered by either Teresa or Isabel who express confidence in his fluency.[[19]](#footnote-19) For Rebecca Walkowitz, the novel’s “impression of multilingualism is achieved… through the dilation of possible translations. Multilingualism is not a matter of *voice*”, but “instead a matter of *form*.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Here, because it “doesn’t choose among the narrator’s linguistic suppositions”—the refusal located in the “conjunction ‘or’ and subjunctive syntax”—the novel “asks us to encounter the effort rather than the achievement of translation”. In this way, the novel “offers a blueprint for translations, rather than the product of translations”. Important to Lerner’s method of translatability, then, is how interpersonal conversation is elevated from communication to conversation *style*. Speaking in “unconjugated sentences or sentence fragments” relies upon the lexical instability of repeated instances of ‘or’—“I would say, Blue is an idea about distance, or Literature ends in that particular blue, or Here are several subjective blues; I would say, To write with sculpture–, To think the vertical–, To refute a century of shadow–, etc” (46). The frequent use of “or” throughout the novel actively suspends translation in favor of interpretative plurality, where meaning shifts at every iteration as if in a chain of whispers.

But as much as Adam reveres this lexical mutability, he also veers into mockery when others in the novel fall victim to misreading. During Adam’s first public reading, he shares the stage with Tomás, a prize-winning Spanish poet who performs a reading so outlandish that Adam smirks at the gullibility of the audience: “here were eighty-some people believing the commercial and ideological machinery of their grammar was being deconstructed or at least laid bare” (38), when in fact they misreading something nonsensical as profound. When attending a film with Isabel, Adam reflects that “[i]f you were to accuse her, say, of reading too much into a particular scene in a movie, she would widen her eyes and look at you with an innocence that made you feel guilty of projection” (82). The central misreading that the novel is concerned with is the transformative political power of literature. At another public event, this time a panel discussion hosted by the Foundation on “Literature Now”, Adam grasps the limitations of purporting any kind of political meaning on the novel, arguing that “[n]o writer is free to renounce his political moment, but literature reflects politics more than it affects it, an important distinction” (175).[[21]](#footnote-21) This is no more evident than in the wake of political events, where “[a] ‘post’ was being formed, and the air was alive less with the excitement of a period than with the excitement of periodization” (140). And while Adam “could not even imagine imagining” his “poems or any poems as machines that could make things happen, changing the government or the economy or even their language, the body or its sensorium”, the novel, in attempting to articulate the grammar of the political event—“where ‘now’ meant post–March 11”, post the Atocha bombings—suggests finding language might be one of the only things literature can do. In the inevitable flickering of meaning, it is only the subjective, the individual, that can respond to the collectivity of the political or institutional.

MINE, YOURS, OURS, THEIRS

Pursuing the grammar of reading, I want to shift to the way in which Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive* models parallel interpretation and rereading, at once echoing and calling into question Lerner’s studied bivalence. When the son of the narrator asks her what *posterity* means, a taut silence that stretches out between them. “I mean—for later”, she replies, but thinks “I’m not sure, though, what ‘for later’ means anymore” (103). Attempting to expand upon this linguistic uncertainty, she describes it thus:

Something changed in the world. Not too long ago, it changed, and we know it. We don’t know how to explain it yet, but I think we can all feel it, somewhere deep in our gut or in our brain circuits. No one has quite been able to capture what is happening or say why. Perhaps it’s just that we sense an absence of future, because the present has become too overwhelming, so the future has become unimaginable. And without future, time feel like only an accumulation.

We might think this affective malaise is the result of her marriage slowly falling apart, or the temporal ramifications of the child refugee crisis. ‘The world’ could be *the world* or *their* world; the ‘we’ could be the world’s attentive population or the more localized ‘we’ of her family; ‘no one’, the same. In the time of the novel’s duration, the narrator’s family (her husband, the boy, and the girl) are driving from New York to the southwest of the US, towards the borderlands, the site of the US border crisis and the heart of Apachería. Her husband is working on a sound documentary about the Apaches, what he calls “an inventory of echoes”, which requires him to relocate for “possibly a year or two” (21). The children and his wife are to go with him—to make her work as a sound documenter “compatible” with his, the narrator shifts the focus of her work on the child refugee crisis in the court of immigration in New York to the border itself—but after that their future as a family is unclear. The novel’s early ambiguity of ‘the southwest’ and uncertain grammar of ‘possibly’ and ‘a year *or* two’ sets up the novel’s uneasy negotiation with futurity within the first few pages. This subjective possibility recalls the way Lerner’s grammar echoes the anxiety of periodization felt in the wake of political crisis, but Luiselli’s reading of uncertainty is less fretful.

In part, the reassurance we are offered is structural; *Lost Children Archive* overlays the routes the family take over the map of the US with intertexts that are folded into the family’s lives. The novel is divided into archive boxes rather than chapters, each listing the books, notebooks, clippings, scraps, musical scores, photographs, migrant mortality reports, and recordings their owners chose to take with them on their road journey; the novel’s archival poetics imbuing reading with a para-institutional structure.[[22]](#footnote-22) The audiobook of Cormac McCarthy’s dystopian novel *The Road* (2005) keeps autoplaying whenever they turn on the car, a ghostly counterpart to their journey; the inventory of one of the boxes the narrator’s husband takes with him on their journey to Apacheria reads “like an all-male compendium of ‘going a journey,’ conquering and colonizing: *Heart of Darkness*, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, *Lord of the Flies, On the Road, 2666*, the Bible” (43). If archives, as the narrator muses, are “a valley in which your thoughts can bounce back to you, transformed” (42), the road narratives of her husband’s Box III reflect a man alone, ominously proleptic of the collapse of their marriage.

Not only does it routinely offer such texts to be read by its characters, but the novel also layers and folds their myriad and individual interpretations into the narrative of the journey—prescriptive, corrective, and moralizing by turns. Listening to The Highwaymen’s 1985 song “Highwayman”, they begin a close reading of the song, “unravelling the lyric as if we were dealing with Baroque poetry”:

My theory is that it’s a song about fiction, about being able to live many lives through fiction. My husband thinks it’s a song about American history, and American guilt. The boy thinks it’s a song about technological developments in means of transportation: from horseback riding to schooners, to spaceship navigation. He may be right. The girl doesn’t have a theory yet but is clearly trying to work it out. (101)

The girl, the youngest, is “cautious and philosophical”, but, aged five, is too young to read well; she is, as her brother explains uncharitably, “a bad reader” (349). She “trie[s] hard to pay attention, too, and pretended to understand everything, even though at times it was difficult to understand” (202), but, with a hint of dyslexia, she “read[s] everything backward or in a mess” (349). The boy, aged ten, is a corrective reader, attuned to the old-fashioned instruction of literary education: “if she wants to understand anything about anything”,he asserts,his sister “needs to understand the classics” like William Golding’s 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies* (90). His philosophy of reading would have been familiar to Cold War era Liberal critics like Lionel Trilling, who advanced the value of literature as tool for moral education. Reading was designed, in Trilling’s words, “to construct people whose quality of intelligence, derived from literary study or refined by it, would ultimately affect the condition of society in certain good ways.”[[23]](#footnote-23) A close reader, the boy exhibits the development of intelligence spurred by literary education: he “listened to things, looked at them—really looked, focused, pondered—and little by little, his mind had arranged all the chaos around us into a world” (184).[[24]](#footnote-24) As Søren Kierkegaard advises those reading philosophy for the first time: “The youth is an existing doubter. Hovering in doubt and without a foothold for his life, he reaches out for the truth—in order to exist in it.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Part of the boy’s own literary education is thus to learn to understand “with my heart and not only with my head” (238), which occurs over the course of the novel’s Part II, when the boy takes over as narrator.

Their mother, the novel’s narrator for the majority of the novel and its central reader, reads even closer still, directed by the close attention of translation. But rather than the subjunctive possibility evident in the accumulative grammar of Lerner’s ‘or’, Ma’s translational reading is predicated on division. She recalls as a child discovering “that words could be cut up into parts like that to be understood better” as her mother gives a definition of ενθουσιασμός (enthusiasm): “En, theos, seismos”; “in, god, earthquake” (173). When reading “the English version of [Marguerite Duras’] *The Lover*”, she unravels the translation of Duras’ description of “her young face as ‘destroyed.’ I wonder if it should be ‘dilapidated,’ ‘devastated,’ or even unmade, like a bed after sex’” (92). She is a rereader and a cataloguer, forming her own personal archive of “loose notes, scraps, cutouts, quotes copied down on cards, letters, maps, photographs, lists of words, clippings, tape-recorded testimonies” that she returns to again and again (23). Content with the ambiguity produced by language, between the slight shifts in the meaning of words, the novel situates the narrator’s reading, “pregnant with possibility” (224), against the boy’s programmatic kind. Listening to music in the car, she asks the children about a line from a song that she mishears as “being in ‘firefly mode’” (177). The girl replies that “[i]t means on and off, on and off”, which Ma likes as it is symptomatic of what she fears about the family’s journey: “[i]t’s a song about switching oneself on and off from one’s own life.” But the boy corrects: “I’m sorry to break it to you, but the lyrics in that song you keep playing and singing say ‘fight-or-flight mode’ and not ‘firefly mode’.” Always quick to tie up narrative ambiguity (“What happened next?” [73]), the novel positions the boy’s corrective drive as naïve reading, as if to offer a “conclusive exegesis” is the worst thing in the world (84). The young reader has limited knowledge and is not yet content to sit within linguistic ambiguity. When the boy asks her why she reads later in the novel and she says “[b]ecause it helps me think and imagine things, I suppose” (224), this distinction is made even clearer. The narrator-as-reader reads in order to think and imagine, while the boy reads to know. As the narrator laments, “[b]ad literary education begins too early and continues for way too long” (61).

Literary meaning haunts more than the family’s various modes of reading; the novel constructs the grammar of becoming a family. Adjectives are numerous—“step-sister, son, stepdaughter, daughter, step-brother, sister, stepson, brother”—as are pronouns—“the us, the them, the our, the your” (6). And in becoming a family, the syntax is palindromic: becoming a family means “learn[ing] the rules of our private grammar”, a “family lexicon [that] defined the scope and limits of our shared world.” Early in their relationship, reading changes the grammar of the narrator and her husband’s intimacy: *her* copy of Susan Sontag’s journals becomes “our copy” (59); “a part of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*… used to be a kind of ur-text or manifesto for my husband and me when we were still a new couple, still imagining and working our future together” (29). Reading Sontag’s journals together is an intimate activity, which reproduces the sensation of love:

I suppose that words, timely and arranged in the right order, produce an afterglow. When you read words like that in a book, beautiful words, a powerful but fleeting emotion ensues. And you also know that soon, it’ll all be gone: the concept you just grasped and the emotion it produced. Then comes a need to possess that strange, ephemeral afterglow, and to hold onto that emotion. So you reread, underline, and perhaps even memorize and the transcribe the words somewhere… (58–59)

Rereading, underlining, re-underlining, memorizing, transcribing, re-transcribing is an intimate methodology, offering up our most closely held thoughts and emotions. Opening Sontag’s journals on their journey, the narrator comes across sentences previously underlined. Taking these quotations placing them into a list writes the traces of their intimacy, their enthusiasm, their obsessions. There is nothing more intimate than a list, Sontag herself wrote in her journals: “I *perceive* value, I *confer* value, I *create* value, I even create—or guarantee—*existence*. Hence, my compulsion to make ‘lists.’ The things (Beethoven’s music, movies, business firms) won’t exist unless I signify my interest in them by at least noting down their names.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Luiselli’s lists, too, are created by things that are loved, both formally and diegetically. The novel’s archives are made of lists, at the beginning of each section. Consider the sentences the couple underlined in Sontag’s journals:

“One of the main social functions of a journal or diary is precisely to be read furtively by other people, the people (like parents & lovers) about whom one has been cruelly honest only in the journal.”

“In a time hollowed out by decorum, one must school oneself in spontaneity.”

“1831: Hegel died.”

“We sit in this rat hole on our asses growing eminent and middle-aged…”

“Moral bookkeeping requires a settling of accounts.”

“In marriage, I have suffered a certain loss of personality—at first the loss was pleasant, easy…”

“Marriage is based on the practice of inertia.”

“The sky, as seen in the city, is negative—where the buildings are not.”

“The parting was vague, because the separation still seems unreal.” (59)

Listing quotations in this way enacts a “local rereading”, as C. Namwali Serpell puts it, of three things: their memory, their reading, and the journals themselves, underscoring how memory, just like reading, always wends its way to the partial.[[27]](#footnote-27) “[R]ereading rends the reader’s consciousness in two,” Serpell has argued, “a present reading self and a past reading self.”[[28]](#footnote-28) “Rereading loose lines and words” again a couple of pages later, the narrator divides the list into even smaller parts—“[m]arriage, parting, moral bookkeeping, hollowed out, separation”—this process of reduction finally coming to the ultimate question: “Did our underlining these words foreshadow it?” (62). Unsure which underlined lines were whose, the final quote in the list bears the marks of multiple readings—“underlined in pencil, then circled in black ink, and also flagged in the margin with an exclamation mark” (59)—as if returned to again and again to guidance and clarification. If rereading is analeptic, reading is proleptic; and the novel’s readers question whether they should turn to literature “as if visiting an oracle” (76).

Reading for improvement, as Beth Blum has put it in *The Self-Help Compulsion*, “has fallen into disfavour among academics,” and is today sequestered off into the self-help market and the work of bibliotherapy.[[29]](#footnote-29) While “scholars today are wringing their hands over the question of the nature of literature’s influence and necessity… self-help has no such qualms about its utility and insists on the singular appeal of literature to offer models for how to survive.”[[30]](#footnote-30)Indeed, “[i]t is possible to find a stronger defence of the charisma, singularity, and even autonomy of the literary in self-help than in most literary criticism.”[[31]](#footnote-31) *Lost Children Archive*’smodel of reading for improvement, too, is not afraid to confront the utility of literature head on. Literary education is important, as we have seen, and books are the thing readers can turn to when in emotional trouble for solace or affective validation. While Blum argues that “in declining to endorse improvement as an end of reading, the professionalisation of literary study, taking its cue from high-literary celebrations of impersonality and autonomy, may have inadvertently ceded an entire market to self-help”, novels such as *Lost Children Archive* show how non-professional readers still turn to high-literary works for self-stylization and self-betterment.[[32]](#footnote-32) Nevertheless, this isn’t a perfect process, for literary works don’t always provide help. As the narrator’s marriage start to crumble, and “the suddenly very unstable grounds of our family space”, is palpable, she turns to “a poem by Anne Carson called ‘Reticent Sonnet’”, which ominously “doesn’t help solve this at all” (26-27).

Where Lerner’s readers are profoundly skeptical about the use of literature beyond its own immanence as language, Luiselli’s find value in reading in part because they bypass the performative literary culture to which Adam Gordon cleaves. There are no universities, no foundations, no art galleries, no critics, and no writers. Stating that she only went to university for a while, and that it is her sister, not her, who is the professional reader in the family, the narrator of *Lost Children Archive* is not schooled in institutional methods of reading. As a reader “outside of the academy”, she has “not surrendered [her] piety”, as Timothy Aubry has noted in *Reading as Therapy*.[[33]](#footnote-33) Consider the near-religious experience she recalls when encountering texts for the first time:

[W]hen I read Sontag for the first time, just like the first time I read Hannah Arendt, Emily Dickinson, and Pascal, I kept having those sudden, subtle, and possibly microchemical raptures—little lights flickering deep inside the brain tissue—that some people experience when they finally find words for a very simple and yet till then unspeakable feeling. (59)

Documenting the affects of reading from the perspective of an uncompromisingly feeling subject, these passages underline the emotional valence of the novel’s formal intertextuality. *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli notes at the end of the novel,“is in part the result of a dialogue with many different texts”, and its close reading passages and collection lists offer an “archive that… is both an inherent and a visible part of the central narrative. In other words, references to sources—textual, musical, visual, or audio-visual—are not meant as side notes, or ornaments that decorate the story, but function as intralinear markers that point to the many voices in the conversation that the book sustains with the past” (381). The novel’s convergence of reading and form is most emphatically found in the *Elegies for Lost Children*, a small red book that the narrator consults to find comfort and direction on her journey to document the US-Mexico border crisis. Written by a fictional Italian writer Ella Camposanto, the narrator tells us, the *Elegies* “is loosely based on the historical Children’s Crusade, which involved tens of thousands of children who traveled alone across, and possible beyond, Europe… in the year 1212” (139). The fragments that are included in the novel—“composed by means of a series of allusions to literary works that are about voyages, journeying, migrating” (382), quoting from those such as Ezra Pound’s “Canto I”, “Canto II”, Canto III”, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Augusto Monterroso’s “El dinosaurio”, and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*—archive the author’s own reading and document Luiselli’s interest in intertextuality not “as an outward, performative gesture but as a method or procedure of composition” (382). Indeed, by writing the *Elegies* in and for the novel we are reading, Luiselli’s citational practice composes a mythopoesis for the US border crisis, a mode of political reading for our times, that importantly upholds fiction as [something] that won’t “separate us and the children from reality, but one that might help us, eventually, explain some of to them” (77).[[34]](#footnote-34)

Despite the narrator’s hope that turning to literature might provide pedagogical solace, she struggles over it—“I read those first lines once, twice—both times getting a little lost in the words and syntax. So I flip back a few pages, to the editor’s foreword, which I’d left unfinished. I read the rest of the foreword, rushing over some parts and zooming in on some details here and there” (142). Flipping, rushing, zooming mark the gestures of rereading, which are present too in the composition of the *Elegies* themselves. In the “Works Cited” section of the novel, Luiselli describes how from Homer she “reappropriate[d] certain rhythmic cadences” and “repurpose[d] and recombine[d] words or word-pairings like ‘swart/night,’ ‘heavy/weeping,’, and ‘stretched/wretched’” from Pound’s “Canto I” (382). The *Elegies*’ fictional author Ella Camposanto, too, worked with this same citational method, “partly compos[ing it] using a series of quotes” (143). Both citation and rereading produce temporal layers in the text. Consider flipping back to reread “The First Elegy” after reading Luiselli’s notes on the composition of *Elegies*. Because it ends with the phrase “Above, the swart night is still” (142), an echo of Pound, and begins with “Mouths open to the sky, they sleep”, an echo of the novel’s first line, rereading this passage prompts us to ‘zoom’ in on how the passage opens and closes, which also the time of Luiselli’s reading, the time of the *Elegies*’ composition, the time of the narrator’s reading, rereading, our reading, and our rereading—all tracing the ‘microchemical raptures’, this time, produced by *re*reading.

Rather than offering solutions, reading highlights the nature of the narrator’s own expressive problems; *Elegies* is a treasure trove of the kind of grammar of crisis in linguistic and literary discourse the narrator herself has trouble formulating in her own project. In a section in the novel’s Box II called “Narrative Arc”, she mulls ruefully on the trouble she has switching from knowing what to document with her recorder, and knowing how to “arrange all the pieces of what she was recording and tell a meaningful story” (78). The gestures of rereading we have already seen—flipping, rushing, zooming—are not carried over into her own methods of composition and her “momentum” is instead brought to a halt. Pressing “Stop on [her] recording device” disrupts the rhythm of her project’s narrative possibilities, becoming “flooded by doubts and problems, paralyzed by hesitance and constant concerns”, which bridle her structural process even further. Telescoping between the micro—personal pronouns, adjectives, and “whimsical phrasal verbs”—and the macro—cultural appropriation and the politicization of the personal—the narrator’s concerns metafictionally play out the novel’s questions about fictionality’s purpose in ongoing crisis:

Political concern: How can a radio documentary be useful in helping more undocumented children find asylum? Aesthetic problem: On the other hand, why should a sound piece, or any other form of storytelling, for that matter, be a means to a specific end? I should know, by now, that instrumentalism, applied to any art form, is a way of guaranteeing really shitty results: light pedagogic material, moralistic young-adult novels, boring art in general. Professional hesitance: But then again, isn’t art for art’s sake so often an absolutely ridiculous display of intellectual arrogance? Ethical concern: And why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else’s suffering? (79)

Closely shadowing these conditions for creating works of art are reasons for reading. None of the works *Lost Children Archive* reads are composed strictly to bring about political change, or created only for instrumentalist reasons, or just for their own ornate selves, or made out of ‘someone else’s suffering’. And yet, ‘art for art’s sake’ is a reason the narrator returns to Sontag, again and again, to recapture the subtle, fleeting ‘raptures’ reading her journals evokes, and the reason for mulling so extensively over the translation of a single word in Duras’ *The Lover*.A hopeful, cautious, and sad instrumentalism, too, is precisely the reason for listening to the audiobook of *Lord of the Flies*, an analogue for the lost children migrating across the US border, and for insisting on listening to Carson McCullers’ *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) to divine the future of her marriage, and for wanting to ask a bookseller for a recommendation for “[a] novel about a couple desperately trying to rid themselves of each other, and at the same time trying desperately to save the little tribe they have so carefully, lovingly, and painstakingly created” (85) or a version of “the myth of Sisyphus… An antidote? A piece of advice?” (86) To prove a point, to search for answers, to find a language for emotion she’s unwilling to confront, to compose a set of instructions for future action: this is a reader fully aware of reading’s own futility, but who pursues literature’s emotional and linguistic promises in spite of it all.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FICTION

What are we to make of Luiselli’s and Lerner’s readers? Though they resist institutional ways of reading and performing reading, do they only offer us in return clichéd versions of the ‘defense of literature’ argument? Reading like them, do we risk oscillating between mild anxiety about what literature is for and overblown optimism about the collective affects literature affords, or resorting to literature to divine an epistemology for life’s intimate and political crises? As I move to the end, I want to consider one final scene of collective reading from each novel to help clarify the way that both Luiselli and Lerner’s novels expose the limits—and suspicion—of collective reading.

At its conclusion, *Leaving the Atocha Station* unconvincingly, and all too quickly, seems to resolve the question of the power of literature. Exuding confidence, Adam “was surprised not to want” (181) his habitual dose of white pills to help him perform the affects required of him at a public reading; he was genial with María José of the Foundation, and he “planned to live forever in a skylit room surrounded by hisfriends” (181). At this moment, his translation method has reached its zenith, as he proposes to a dubious Teresa that she “would read the originals and Iwould read the translations and the translations would become the originalsas we read” (181). Buying into the affective largesse of the performativity of public poetry, Adam’s sudden buoyancy brings about a vision of community that is so utopic it seems ridiculous. This reversal is set up as the affective maturation of the novel’s poet-artist, who when coming to the end of his time abroad, has finally allowed himself to learn from the institutional good of his fellowship. Yet if we believe in this ending, it says as much about us as it does about Adam. When we choose to read this straight, as optimistic however unlikely, we indicate our own aesthetic and political preferences for a romantic model of reading that can miraculously transform ourselves and our communities by *feeling* it to be so.

Walking into a bookstore in Asheville, North Carolina, *Lost Children Archive*’scentral family stumbles upon a book-club and, once inside, are quick to “assume the silent, respectful role of spectators who have walked into a theatre in the play’s second act” (83). The book-club are discussing “a fat volume”, we are told, and “on a poster next to the book is the face of a handsome man, too handsome, maybe: tousled hair, a weather-scarred complexion, melancholy eyes, a cigarette tucked between his fingers” (83). This image of the author, and the discussion of the volume that follows, conspicuously recall the face and work of Karl Ove Knausgård, but these features are anonymous enough to reference any number of male authors who have written volumes rather than novels, books that hover between fiction and non-fiction (‘flickering’ in Lerner’s terms).[[35]](#footnote-35) These are features, too, anonymous enough to reference any number of past and future—wait for it—*lovers*. The narrator muses: “faces like this one remind me abstractly of a face I once loved, a face of a man I was maybe not loved by in return, but with whom I at least had a beautiful daughter before he disappeared” (83), but also “future men whom I could love and might be loved by but won’t have enough lives to try” (84). Taking up the tenor of the intimacy of knowing something closely, the book-club members speak of the volume with certainty:

Despite the quotidian repetition, says one book club member, with an air of professorial authority, the author is able to hinge on value of the real.

Yes, says another book-club attendee, like in the marriage scene.

I agree, says a young woman. It’s about carving out everyday detail and finding the kernel of the real in the very heart of boredom…

I think it’s more about the impossibility of fiction in the age of nonfiction, says a soft-spoken woman whose contribution passes unacknowledged.

More than a book club, this sounds like a graduate seminar. I understand nothing of what they say. I take a book randomly from the shelf, Kafka’s *Diaries*. I open it and read: “October 18, 1917. Fear of night. Fear of night.” I think, instantly, I should buy this book, today. Now an older man speaks to the group, sounding as though he’s about to offer the conclusive exegesis:

The book presents truth-telling as a commodity, and it questions the exchange value of truth presented as fiction, and conversely the added value of fiction when it’s rooted in truth. (84)

Only the softly spoken woman’s quiet positing lacks the certainty of the ‘professorial’ air that characterizes the others’ institutionally inflected readings; hers is a quieter, subtler recognition of a reader’s inability to truly account for what a text is about. This style of interpretation is positioned clearly as one we are meant to identify with the narrator, perhaps because the narrator’s ‘contributions’ also ‘pass unacknowledged’ within her family’s circle of reading, and her style of reading, couched within her own subjectivity (‘I think’), is directly opposed to the kind of male ‘exclusive exegesis’ she identifies in her husband. Because we identify her with the narrator, too, this moment of meta-reading encourages us to loop our attention back to the novel’s examination of literature’s impossibilities. While the face of the author of course directs us away from Luiselli herself—splitting herself into two figures in the same novel as Lerner would is simply not her style—*Lost Children Archive*, too, positions fiction against news reports on the radio, against the deportation of child refugees. The narrator turns to non-fiction, to diaries—Sontag’s and here in the bookstore, Kafka’s—to construct a language for living a life full of doubt and suffering. And yet, the novel also resists the idea that fiction must be instrumentally useful, must be able to affect political change—stop the deportations! It is no wonder this section is entitled “Allegory”.

In talks and interviews, Luiselli has reflected on the complicated political process of writing *Lost Children Archive*. Like the narrator, while on a road trip across the US with her family Cochise Country in Arizona, near the border with Mexico, she composed and collected “a bunch of notes, and about a hundred Polaroids”.[[36]](#footnote-36) Upon returning to New York, she began work as “as a volunteer translator and screener” in immigration courts, and the longer she worked on the novel in this context, the more it became “a sort of depository or vessel for all the things I was witnessing in court, as well as the general political confusion and sadness.” The novel, she argues, “was getting kind of stuffy and illegible… I tried to, as you say it in Spanish, *meterla con calzador* (‘jam it in,’ literally, ‘use a shoehorn’) in a fictional narrative”, as “I was trying to dump in it all my political frustration and confusion and sadness and rage.”[[37]](#footnote-37) She stopped writing it in 2015, turning instead to write *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017), a slim volume that documents in essay style the experience of working with migrant children to translate, but also recompose, their stories ahead of hearings and deportations. Only once she had exhausted the urgency of the material that made it into *Tell Me How It Ends*, was she “able to go back to *Lost Children Archive* and think about it not as a political hammer, but as a space that was more multilayered, ambivalent, more like life—in the sense that it was not about any one thing, but about many things.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Describing her novel in an interview with *NPR*, she notes that while it is a novel that meditates on migration and diaspora, “[i]t’s not a novel *about* immigration but a novel *with* immigration”; while a novel about a family, and a couple falling out of love, it is also “a novel that grapples with how to document and write about and think about political violence and about political crisis.”[[39]](#footnote-39) It’s a novel that, as one of the book-club participants offered, “questions the exchange value of truth presented as fiction, and conversely the added value of fiction when it’s rooted in truth” (84).

The book-club’s readers in Asheville, questioning fiction’s ability to tell the truth, sounds uncannily like Adam in *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Though vague and wishy-washy, “the value of the novel they are discussing is that it is not a novel”, that it deals with *the truth*, “[t]hat it is fiction but also it is not” (85). Both novels are fiction-and-not-fiction; both sometimes eschew critical readings because they are enacting their own modes of reading upon themselves. These aren’t tied to methods like surface reading or reparative reading or critique. They don’t name their forms of reading as close or distant. They actively resist reading with institutional directives and show that trying to do so can not only feel unnecessarily performative, but leads to obfuscation rather than illumination. While the novels—and their diegetic moments of close reading—do practice the critical vocabulary of institutional reading, they also illuminate the benefits of the experiences of individual readers over collective and public readings. Reading on the individual’s own terms, they intimate, might be precisely the aesthetic education we need.

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1. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, “Introduction”, *Critique and Postcritique* (Duke UP, 2017), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Zadie Smith, “Read Better”, *Guardian* (20 January 2007). While it is no longer accessible on the *Guardian*, it is accessible here: www.sissevres.org/en/the-limits-of-fiction-part-2.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. C. Namwali Serpell, “A Heap of Cliché”, *Critique and Postcritique*, eds. Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski (Duke UP, 2017), 153. Anker and Felski have also noted critique’s tendency towards the singular: “[c]ritique, it is argued, implies a methodological orientation that encourages certain kinds of interpretation while leaving little room for others” (“Introduction”, 15). Though the postcritical turn seeks to resist critique’s hegemony, new reading systems born out of this methodological transformation still strive to become communal and therefore reach some level of ubiquity themselves by encouraging critics to read *in the style of* (for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick’s reparative reading). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rachel Cusk, *Kudos* (Macmillian, 2018).All subsequent references to *Kudos* will be made in-text. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A study carried out by psychology and educational researchers in English classrooms concluded that “reading challenging, complex novels aloud and at a fast pace in each lesson repositioned ‘poorer readers’ as ‘good’ readers, giving them a more engaged uninterrupted reading experience over a sustained period”, finding that ‘just’ reading in fact increased comprehension in young readers (60). For more, see: Jo Westbrook, Julia Sutherland, Jane Oakhill, and Susan Sullivan, “‘Just reading’: the impact of a faster pace of reading narratives on the comprehension of poorer adolescent readers in English classrooms” (*Literacy*, 53 [2019], 60–68). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Coffee House Press, 2011); Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (4th Estate, 2019). All subsequent references to these novels will be made in-text. Many readers will recognize the novels I’m identifying as autocritical as autofictional too. Cusk, Lerner, and Luiselli do indeed work in this genre, folding themselves into their fiction. However, for a text to be autocritical it doesn’t also necessarily need to be autofictional, too, and vice versa. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Another autofictional writer, Chris Kraus, notes the core problem some writers and critics have with autofiction, disavowing it in relation to her own work: “I would never use that term”, Kraus protests, “[i]t’s such a strange term. It’s applied to my work, and to a lot of other people’s work, but I would never use it. There are so many examples in the history of literature of a male first-person that’s used pretty closely to the identity of the writer, and we don’t call it that. The corny beat example, Jack Kerouac, we don’t call that autofiction. Herman Melville, do we call that autofiction? All of American realism that’s written in the first person—we don’t call that autofiction” (quoted in “Drawn From Life”). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This was a phrase reiterated and examined by most reviewers following *Leaving Atocha Station*’spublication. Although it is transformed through Adam’s subsequent treatment of John Ashbery, Lerner’s reviewers have nonetheless simplified its application in the novel. Instead they focus on profound experiences of art as applying solely to visual art, and as indicative of the novel’s overall aesthetic impulses, rather than other aesthetic experience such as reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Worlds: Reclaiming an Unredeemed Utopian Motif”, *New Literary History*, vol. 37, no, 2 (Spring 2006), 299–318. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago UP, 2017), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mary McCarthy, *Birds of America* (Penguin, 2018 [1971]), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*,trans Louise and Ayler Maude (Oxford UP, 1995 [1878]), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John Ashbery interviewed by A. Poulin, “The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ashbery, “Experience of Experience,” 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Harvard UP, 2009), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lerner, Interview by Gayle Rogers, *Contemporary Literature*, 54.2 (2013), 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Other examples include: “‘I didn’t mean that exactly, but it’s difficult to express myself with subtlety in Spanish,’ I said. ‘You are fluent in Spanish, Adán,’ she said, maybe sadly” (111). And, “‘I don’t understand what story you said before to me,’ is probably what I said. ‘My Spanish is very bad. I get nervous.’ ‘Your Spanish is good,’ she said” (13). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated* (Columbia UP, 2015), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Public readings, as Emre shows in *Paraliterary*, have a history of communicating “a mass-mediated love—a love that, by transcending any individual instance of reading, made itself available to international publics as an active, reciprocal, and reproducible structure of feeling; a love that was thus capable of governing not only an individual’s emotional responses but also an increasingly unruly geopolitical order at midcentury” (60). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. As Luiselli has noted in an interview with Mary Wang for *Guernica Magazine*, “[t]here are always fingerprints of the archive in my books.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture* (Harcourt Grace, 1965), 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Close reading was essential to Trilling’s program, too, of reading because it was the very methodology embodied by the novel: “the novel,” he argued, “is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world” (*The* *Liberal Imagination* [Viking, 1950],221). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Søren Kierkegaard, “The Subjective Thinker”, *Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson, ed. Walter Lowrie (Princeton UP, 1968), 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries 1964-1980* (Penguin, 2012). Sontag also knew the practice of annotation intimately, as we have seen from her annotated copy of James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Harvard UP, 2014), 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Beth Blum, *The Self-Help Compulsion* (2020), 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (U of Iowa Press, 2006), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. As David James has recently shown, although poetry has been elegy’s home, contemporary novels have taken up a form of narrative elegy that “ask[s] not only whether grief’s intricacies can ever be captured in language but also whether the quest for such a language reaches for aesthetic consolations of its own, setting up an internal competition in these works between bereavement’s ingenious description and the proviso of inexpressibility that elegies often thematize” (*Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* [Oxford UP, 2019], 25–6). Though it is only Luiselli who negotiates the elegiac structures of language in narrative form through *Elegies*, both novelists thematize inexpressibility, itself a trope of narrative elegy. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Internecine spats or casting a side-eye to another writer is a common trope in contemporary novels that we could call autofictional.  [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Valeria Luiselli, Interview by John Washington, “‘How Do You Address Disappearance?’: A Q&A With Valeria Luiselli”, *The Nation* (April 1, 2019): <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/valeria-luiselli-interview-lost-children-archive/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Valeria Luiselli, Interview by Scott Simon, *NPR* (March 9, 2019): <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/09/701838156/valeria-luiselli-on-the-lost-children-archive>; Luiselli, Interview by Washington. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Luiselli, Interview by Washington. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Luiselli, Interview by Simon. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)